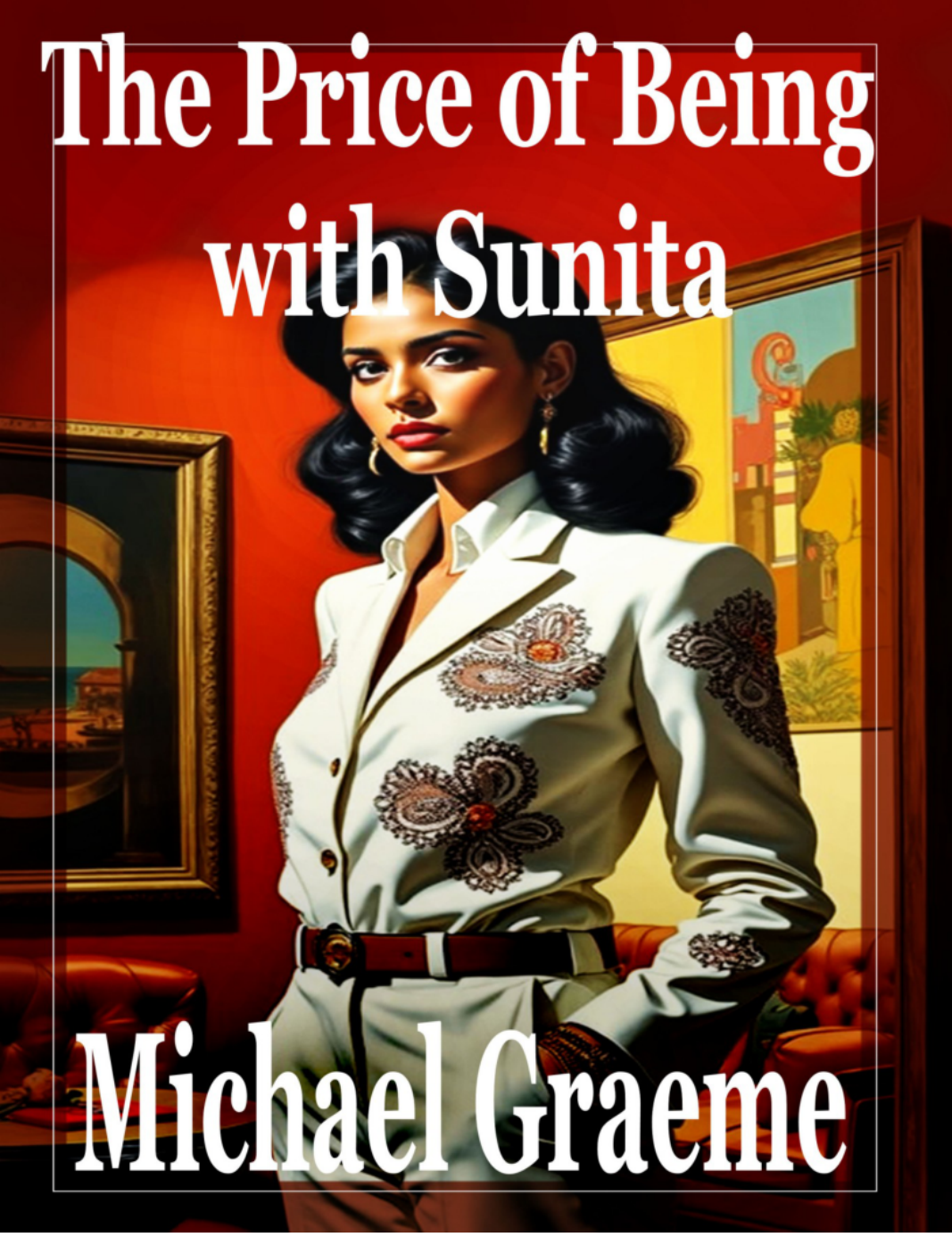
The Price of Being with Sunita
Michael Graeme

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by

Michael Graeme

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Chapter One

I'm here at one of those psychic-nights at the Bay Horse pub, on Longlin Road in Preston. I've never been to one before and I'm guessing it's all fake, but I'm curious and looking to connect with something different, something more than the same old run of things. What I'm about to discover will change my life, but not in the way I expect. And I can tell you now I'm going to get more than I've bargained for.

The evening's psychic, for want of a better word, is this middle aged guy, casually dressed in jeans and an open necked shirt, displaying a huge gold-bling chain. He looks more like a tradesman on a lads' night out – anyway there he is: Eddie, he calls himself, and his cold-reading skills are embarrassingly gauche. It's as if he graduated from the school of scoundrels with a D. Maybe if he'd done better he might have been on one of those, glitzy digital channels by now, instead of grafting for coppers in a backstreet pub.

"Anyone here from... I'm getting a C... no?... it might be a B..."

And then: "Have we an Annie, in the audience tonight? Alice then? No? Maybe it's Amanda?..."

By chance there's an Amanda; she blushes and puts her hand up. Eddie is visibly relieved. He switches script and asks Amanda if she's recently lost an older relative... or a pet... or a precious possession... and so it goes on.

It's dreadful. the audience is getting restless and the landlord's going to have to bring the band on soon or the heckling's going to turn nasty, and "nasty" in dives like this in downturn Britain means broken glass. I tune it out, buy a drink and slump down at my wobbly, beer-sticky table. I don't know what I expected – a miracle I suppose, but instead here I am paying extortionate prices to drink gut-rot ale, while wondering how my life could ever have grown so dull I could end up in a place like this.

That's when I notice Sunita.

She's sitting towards the back of the room, very still. Indeed her stillness renders her almost invisible, but once you realise she's there

her beauty has such a magnificence and a depth about it, you wonder why everyone isn't staring at her with their mouths wide open. There's something else too, something I can only describe as "quality": pressed trousers, ivory silk blouse and a suede jacket, expensive things, but not flashy. It marks her as a high income earner, yet she's down here amongst us economically inactive types, in our cheap, crumpled, far-eastern sweatshop threads.

I'm thinking she must be with someone, because this really isn't the kind of watering hole a woman like that comes to on her own. I can't see anyone, but don't get me wrong here – I've no intentions of introducing myself. I'm looking for many things right now, and all of them a mystery to me, but company – especially female company – isn't one of them.

I've never been good with women. When I was younger it used to trouble me, but nowadays I can more easily accept I'll never get any closer to a woman like that than I am right now. She's most likely married anyway, or she's waiting for her boyfriend, or she's barking-mad, or a crack-head, or any one of an endless list of other relationship red lines, and on top of them all she's just too beautiful to be true.

My eyes linger for a moment too long. She catches me looking and her stillness is momentarily broken by the flicker of her eyes as she picks me out. Then she returns her languid gaze to Eddie. I'm embarrassed, staring at her like that. What was I thinking? I hope I've not made her feel uncomfortable.

She slips her hand into her bag, pulls out her 'phone, dials a number, then presses it to her ear, all with the same slow, liquid movements. She's calling her husband, her boyfriend, the police maybe, to tell them there's this weird guy staring at her.

Just then my 'phone starts vibrating. This surprises me because, although I still carry the thing around, there's not been any credit on it for a year or more and it's ages since anyone actually called me. I wasn't even sure it worked and I'm relieved it does. Anyway, I ignore it for a bit because I don't recognise the number and I'm guessing it's a cold-caller. So it goes quiet, but then it starts again, and now I'm wondering who wants me so desperately at this hour on a Saturday night, and I've long since fallen out of knowing anybody that well, but it makes me feel important so, finally... I answer it.

I hear a woman's voice, soft, breathy, warm: "Hello, Derek. Are you enjoying the show?"

"I'm sorry... who is this?"

"Across the room."

I look up to Sunita who's looking directly at me. The phone's still pressed to her ear, and to my astonishment she wiggles her fingers, then gives me a friendly smile: "You flatter me," she says.

"How did you get my number?"

"I found it."

"What do mean, you found it? How can you? Have we met before? I'm sure I would remember... I,..."

"Don't," she says, cutting me off. "Don't cover your feelings with words. That spoils it. Words are always lies. It's only feelings you can trust."

"Feelings?"

"Yes. Feeling you can never have me, feeling you don't want me, but wanting me all the same. Its just fear Derek. But you needn't be afraid of me."

This is impossible of course and I must be imagining things, except Sunita's lips are moving in perfect sync with the voice in my ear. She knows my name and my number. She even knows what I'm thinking. But we've never met before. At this point the whole bar could be kicking off and chairs flying but I wouldn't know. All there is in the whole world right now, is Sunita.

"Okay," I tell her. "You've got my attention. So, what now?"

"So stop talking for a moment, and look at me. That's better. Be still and just look... that's right. There it is. I feel it again. I can only trust you if I can feel you, so you need to hold on to that stillness for a while. Have you the steadiness for it, do you think?"

Steadiness? Sure, I know a thing or two about steadiness. You don't cut metal in the same factory for twenty years without a certain steadiness. But what am I *feeling*? Sometimes it's difficult to know

because, like Sunita says, we tend to cover our feelings with words – most of them meaningless – and it takes a certain stillness to notice if we're actually feeling anything at all.

And I feel what? Attracted to her? Of course I do, but I'm old enough to know better than to run with that one. What is it then? It's an emptiness, I suppose, a bottomless pit of loneliness and longing for something I cannot define, and no longer believe exists. But looking at Sunita I'm momentarily reassured I'd be unwise to give up on it completely.

I don't believe for a minute a woman like this is interested in me, and I'm wise enough to know that all the beauty and magnificence I've seen in her are just fancies I've invented and attached to her like cheap labels. Even the most beautiful woman can start looking a bit jaded of a morning with her carefully painted face already wiped off on the pillow, and you've been waiting an hour for the bathroom so you can clean your teeth. The truth of Sunita? Beneath the beauty she presents... well... that's anyone's guess, right?

"So?" she says.

"So what?" I say.

"What do you feel? I mean, if you can put your finger on it, then it's a start, isn't it?"

"Feel? I feel... looking at you... I feel,…"

Should I be corny, flirtatious, or just plain filthy? Or should I be,... sincere?

How do I feel? "I feel... better about myself, I think."

I don't know why I chose those exact words – what possessed me – but they're sincere at least. She looks at me across that rough, rowdy, beer-stinking pub, and then she says: "That's interesting. Yes... I think that'll do. I'll be outside if you want to talk some more. It's getting noisy in here. And it’s not really our sort of place."

No. And Longlin road's not the sort of place to linger, either. Its heydey was a hundred years ago, and it's been slipping deeper into squalor ever since - Edwardian terraces, some of them boarded up, some of them cleared into vast bulldozed fields of rubble, and what bits are left

standing are all graffiti-sprayed and dirty. Only the pub remains, while giving the impression it too is not long for the world.

If she's going to wait outside, I'm hoping she's brought some muscle with her.

Anyway, the street's empty when I go outside, and then I'm thinking I've blown it, or that maybe she was only teasing me. But that makes me realise I've been lying to myself – that I'm drawn to her, helpless as any man with eyes would be, and for all of my smart-mouthed talk, I'm wanting a chance to be with her, with anyone really, because I'm lonely and lost, and looking to connect with the one thing that'll grant meaning to an otherwise empty life.

I look up and down the street, puzzled she could have disappeared so quickly, but then she comes up from behind, as if she's materialised from thin air.

"Sorry," she says. "Did I startle you?"

She's even more beautiful up close – tall, and her dusky skin is flawless. She has a lovely black mane of hair, and astonishingly big eyes.

"People are at their most sincere, when startled," she says. "Don't you agree? No time to cover their feelings."

"You talk a lot about feelings."

She gives a shrug as if it's obvious. "Feelings are all we have," she says. "The rest is delusion. Chatter. Nonsense. Words... "

"You've still not told me how you know me."

"I didn't know you, not really... at least until a moment ago."

"Then how?...."

"I've felt your presence for a while. I've... been looking for you, Derek."

"And that means?...."

"It means we can be friends... I think... if you want to."

"Look... you're a beautiful woman but..."

"I didn't mean friends like,... *that*. Wait!... hold that feeling for a moment. What was that? Yes… I felt a cynicism inside of you... bad relationships.... mistakes – not all of them yours. There's a bitterness too – you've been let down. Who hasn't? But what you're looking for... *really* looking for, I can show you this, I think."

"Yea, right."

"There you go again! Cynical man! But the question you should be asking yourself is not: can this woman really show me what she says she can, but rather, would you even recognise it? And if you *could* recognise it, having been shown it, would you still want it?"

"I don't understand where you're going with this."

"You can be like me," she says. "Actually, you *are* like me – you just don't know it yet." Her eyes twinkle mischievously. "Tell me my name."

"How can I? I don't know it."

"Yes you do. Clear away the words, Derek. *Feel*. And tell me my name."

I'm ready to dismiss the idea with some witty remark, but then, as ridiculous as this might sound, I'm getting the feeling I want to call her Sunita... and a part of me feels irrationally confident that it's true. Her eyes widen a fraction as if in anticipation: "Go on," she says.

"But I could say anything and you could tell me it's right."

"Just tell me what you feel..."

"You are Sunita Singh? Thirty five years old? Your father is a... watchmaker? Your mother is... no longer with us... and...."

"Go on, you're doing very well."

"But I could just be making this up… like… like imagination… like a story."

I'd say she was just playing with me, and the only reason I indulge her is because she's beautiful and her eyes are mesmerising. But I'm

feeling something else now, as these spurious bits of information come together, as if with each fact gleaned I also invite a piece of her inside my head. They are pieces of feeling: wordless, indescribable, except to say they are infinitely powerful, elemental, astonishing, and I know I cannot linger on any of them without fear of being overwhelmed, of drowning in the tidal wave of her being. I draw back, shaking my head.

"I'm sounding like that fraudster in there."

"You're babbling again. You sound the opposite of poor Eddie. And all of what you've told me is true. Go back to the feeling now, then tell me what else you *feel* in me."

But I can't. I won't. It's too outlandish, too strange... and yes – too frightening. "How about I try to guess your telephone number and call you up?" This seems so ridiculous a thing as to be completely impossible and I say it frivolously, wanting to put her off, to distract her.

She smiles indulgently. "But you already have it, remember? It's in your 'phone – since I called you."

"Of course... stupid of me."

She looks away, and I feel the intensity of whatever it is between us fade a little. It's like she's letting me off the hook, but I'm not sure I want her to. This is the most alive I've felt in years!

"You're growing fearful," she says. "That wasn't my intention. I'm sorry."

Just then a taxi cruises up to the kerb. "This is for me," she says. "Call me if you want to talk again, but I'm warning you: I have reasons of my own for seeking you out. And they are unlikely to be what you are thinking."

"How can you tell what I'm thinking?"

"Because my dear Derek, I literally *know* what you are thinking. I read your mind, like Eddie in there pretends to – like you just read mine – only for real. Okay? You are an open book to me."

I watch her disappear into the back of the taxi, then drive away into

sodium orange night and I experience a sense of loss, a feeling I might never see her again – not that I don't have the means of contacting her, because I clearly do... but rather that when it comes to it, I won't have the courage to follow it up.

There's something very dangerous in this: the evidence of my eyes and ears tells me Sunita possesses abilities I had, until then, always supposed were the tricks of showmen. I don't know how she knows so much about me, but the fact she came over to this side of town, so far out of her class, in search of something, of someone, like me, suggests a desperation.

And that cannot be good.

Chapter Two

As a younger man, I climbed the ladder of education and career, well clear of my humble origins. From the rented two-up two downs of an inner city housing estate, which I shared with my parents and three siblings, I achieved the relatively affluent trappings of a semi-detached suburbia, with a private driveway and a modest second-hand motor car. It was not so difficult in those days. One merely worked hard, presented a respectable and respectful manner to whomever you had the misfortune to be serving at the time, and the doors to a middle income were more or less certain to open.

You think it's easy cutting metal? You think it's easy to program a multi million dollar six-axis machine? Do you even know what that is? Do you think it's easy to achieve accuracies that make the thickness of a human hair seem fatter than a tree trunk? My skills were in demand, I was respected, sought after. There are things I have made that are in orbit around Mars. You would think I was safe then wouldn't you? But in a world driven primarily by the dollar, skills and education, respect and respectability, are no guarantee of ongoing economic viability. And the economy is like the weather; it changes, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do about it.

Sunita was right. There is a lot of bitterness in me still.

To fall back is hard, and the first thing you notice when you hit the ground nowadays is that the ladder is no longer there for you to climb back up again. When I was a boy you did not need money behind you as a precursor for success. Nowadays you do. Still, I was better off than most in that I had steadfastly avoided any kind of debt. Home for now is a one-bedroomed flat in the upstairs of a dark Victorian terrace, a long way from the leafy suburbia of my glory-days, but it was better than actually living *on* the streets. I was forty five, and unemployable – not because I lacked skill or education, more because I lacked youth.

I lived on the humiliation of state handouts but generally managed, day to day. Some of my fellow underclass appeared to be doing better – flat-screen TVs that blared out rubbish long into the night, and were possessed of all manner of other fancy goods, financed I presume by the dubious devil of credit. I had not the nerve for dabbling in that sort of thing.

So, I lived a sort of hermit-like existence, rich only in solitude and the run of my thoughts, while lacking the normal things most of you take for granted.

Yet I missed none of it.

The flat had smelled when I'd moved in – mouldy furnishings, and mouldy carpets, so I'd slung them out and lived on bare boards, keeping my few belongings in what I'd suppose in olden days would have been called a seaman's chest, and I slept like a pioneer on a roll-out mattress. My days were spent in search of work, in filling out applications for jobs that had been taken even before I ever clicked the send button.

I had begun to feel old and slow and useless. I did not squander my hand-outs on drink nor drugs... yet opinion polls informed me that ever greater numbers of the still employed classes thought me a sponger and a waste of space. In short, the rational, secular world had failed me, and now it had rejected me – is it any wonder I sought solace in the mysterious back-alleys of the occult?

But I digress...

There is a meaning to all things, and my slide into this singular state of monkish austerity was the finest preparation for what would shortly follow. Indeed things began to change almost at once after that night... I mean, the night I met Sunita.

How did it begin?

Well, like many of my fellow underclass, I'm tempted into squandering a small percentage of my state-handouts on a lottery ticket each week. It's a harmless distraction, and we all need hope, even though I know how remote the chances of a big win are. It's more the dream that makes it worthwhile. They say money cannot bring happiness, but the people telling you that have never missed a meal because they had not the money to pay for it.

Anyway, one evening in the shop, prior to filling out my ticket, a mood comes over me, and I decided to change my usual "lucky numbers" selecting some at random, numbers that simply popped into my head.

Next thing I know I'm staring at a ticket worth two million quid.

That changes everything. Well, it would, wouldn't it.

So, what do you do then?

Well, I buy myself a new car and a few pieces of decent furniture to sit and sleep upon, but apart from that I keep quiet about the money, hardly daring to believe it, indeed expecting to wake up at any moment as penniless as ever.

And then... well, flash forward to the present and I'm so anxious about the money now, and where it came from, because something doesn't feel right about it, so I finally pluck up courage to call Sunita. She answers right away, and before I can even speak, she says: "Is it enough, do you think?"

It's months since we spoke that night outside the pub on Longlin Road, but we pick up now as if it were no time at all.

"Is what enough?"

"The money."

"You know about the money?"

"Some people would say it's not a lot: Two Million."

"It's more than I've ever earned in my life... but how do you know about the money?"

"The same way I know you're wearing a Timex watch, a blue shirt and jeans, and you're having trouble with the metatarsals of your left foot. And you're right by the way... the doctor can do nothing for you. It'll go away on its own..."

"Sunita, how do you... *how do you know*?"

"Never mind that. Tell me how you *feel*, Derek."

"Feel? Secure. I feel secure now."

"And happy? Be honest."

"Happy, of course. No, wait... I suppose not exactly happy. But now the

basics are taken care of, I can start thinking about what it is that makes me happy again. But, tell me, it i*s* real, isn't it? I mean the money? It's not a trick of some kind?"

"The money's in your bank isn't it?"

"Last time I checked."

"Well then."

"I suppose what I'm saying is, have I cheated somehow? This doesn't feel right. Those numbers, I thought I'd made them up, but I didn't, did I? I knew what they were going to be."

"Relax. I didn't put those numbers into your head if that's what you're thinking. You picked them yourself."

"But you *knew*... you knew I'd won the money."

"I know everything about you Derek." There's a pause and then she says: "So... do you want to come over, and we can talk about it?"

Chapter Three

She lives out by the docks in a luxurious apartment, overlooking the water. These aren't the dingy docks of old, of course, the docks of my youth, where jolly tars staggered drunk from dirty coasters into the arms of waiting prostitutes. They've been tidied up, sanitised into a safe haven for high-earners. There's a classy, domed shopping mall full of luxury goods right on the doorstep, the business district a short commute away, clean tarmac, trees, and a private security patrol to keep the glue sniffers and other dope heads away. It's hard to believe this is the same town, hard to believe... as exclusive as this place looks... that by some miracle, I can afford to live here myself now.

She lets me in.

She's wearing a neat business suit, the crisp cut of it softened by a pearl necklace and earrings. I don't get it. I can understand a woman like this perhaps wanting to cross over the tracks and slum it for a bit of fun, but she'd go in disguise, go crumpled and un-ironed, careless of her nails and make-up. Dressing like an earner on my side of town is only inviting robbery, or worse. What had she been thinking? Yet there's also an air about her... that she can take care of herself... that she can avoid trouble by sensing it ahead of time and simply melting into the shadows.

She reads my mind, reads the question I have not the courage to ask.

"I was only there because I was looking for you," she says.

I'm sitting on a cream leather sofa now, and feeling so grubby I'm afraid I might stain it. She catches my embarrassment, looks pointedly at me and says: "Don't. Such feelings are unbecoming."

"I can't help it. I should have spent a little money on better clothes. You look so fine, like a lady. And I look... well... as you see, a little crumpled still."

She shrugs carelessly. "I have money of course. It puts me outside of things a little. But then I've always been outside of things in a way. You're the same, remember?"

"Is your family wealthy?"

"You know they aren't. My father repairs mechanical watches in an electronic age. But he'll never want for anything. I can take care of him."

"Then how did you come by it?"

"The money? Same as you. The lottery – an obscene amount." She lets slip a smile, something self-deprecating about it. "I was greedy. I wanted to be sure I'd manage."

There's a cool, quiet, calmness about the apartment. It's not fussy. The furnishings are comfortable, but there's no ornamentation. It has, dare I say, a spiritless sterility about it?

"You're quick to pick up on that," she says.

She's read my mind again. It's the most frightening thing about her: I feel helpless, vulnerable, naked in her company, but it's also refreshing that pretence is useless; I can be nothing other than myself with her. I do not always like myself, or even know myself – who of us does? But whatever I am, in the depths of my soul, she does not seem to mind it.

"Ornamentation is useless," she goes on. "I can look at a picture and it will reflect back only my own state of mind – not the artist's. The view from my window serves just as well for that."

I nod. I feel – really feel – I understand this. But I also feel an overwhelming loneliness – not mine; mine speaks for itself; the loneliness I feel is hers and I'm astonished by it.

Yes, she's lonely, but not for company, not sex or anything so simple as that. I don't know what she's looking for, only that it's complex, dark, overwhelming, and dangerous.

And she's aching for it.

She's looking at me knowingly. "Oh, but you want it too," she tells me. "It surprises you –the longing you feel in me?"

"Yes. I thought you must have already found the answer, surely? I mean – someone like you, capable of such... insight."

She shakes her head, slowly, for emphasis, her hair glistening with long waves of light. "My field of view is a little wider than yours," she says. "But such a thing only makes you realise how perfect it is, this thing we seek, so we desire it all the more."

How did she find me? Was it really me she'd been looking for, or would anyone have done?...

She smiles, such a sweet, wide, white-toothed smile. "I felt you," she says. "I felt you when I moved into the city a few months ago. It's taken me a while to pin-point you, that's all. And you're right, I suppose: someone else might have done... but not just *anyone,* you understand. It had to be someone like me*. Like us.*"

"But I'm not like you. I can't... read minds..."

"You're already doing it, Derek."

I think about this. If you can read the mind and sense the feelings of anyone near, it might come in handy, I suppose, but at what cost? What if someone you love is smiling at you, but thinking something else, so you know the smile is false? Would you really want to know the truth, or would you rather be oblivious? Would you not rather cover the truth with pretence in order to spare your feelings?

"Now you're getting it," she says.

"So, if you have two people who are alike – I mean like you... and you're both able to read each other's minds at the same time – I mean surely that makes it much worse. Have you ever met anyone with your abilities?"

"Yes. But once you become aware of the reach of your mind, you can take steps to censor its content. People like us become guarded with each other, selective in which thoughts, which feelings we are prepared to reveal."

"That's possible?"

"Yes, it's rather like catching the thought as it emerges from the cloud of feeling. You can decide whether to let it escape, or you can choose to guard it."

"But, you *could* be totally unguarded, if you chose to be?"

"Yes. But people like us are so rare, and those I've met have always been unwilling to go that far." She sighs. "I've bared myself to that extent, once I've learned to trust them, but in the end they've always been too afraid, too confused by what they think it might mean to respond in kind. I'm telling you this so you know it's not such a blessing as people might think – the way we are. If two people like us were ever completely open with one another, who knows what would happen? But such a thing... well... that's what I'm looking for... with you... if you're willing."

I have no notion of what such a thing might be truly like of course, and the closest I can come to is when you put a microphone too close to an amplifier – you get feedback, the sound eating itself and spitting itself out at the same time. You get this tremendous squeal of energy, so overwhelming it's like it wants to split your head.

She nods. "Exactly. Knowing your thoughts would alter my own, which, if you could read them, would modify yours, which would modify mine... and so on and so on. There would be a chain reaction of thought and resulting feeling. It might be dangerous, but it might also elevate our awareness onto another plane. It could be extraordinary, Derek. The question is, do you have the courage to try? Do you have the courage to be so completely open with me? Such a thing – it would be the most intimate and mind blowing experience two people could ever share."

I'm thinking how helpless I am before her. There is no part of me she does not already know or feel, no corner of my mind or memory she cannot run her fingers through. I look at her, and feel such a mixture of things: amazement, awe, suspicion, fear, desire... some of these things I'm happy for her to sense, others I'm ashamed.

"What I'm asking you Derek is, if you were like me, and I invited you inside, would you have the courage to enter?"

"You say the others you've met were afraid. If it's dangerous, why would you want to risk such a thing?"

"Others fear it because they aren't yet bored enough to want to take things to their only logical conclusion. But there is nothing else for people like us. To my mind it's inevitable; it's what we are made for."

"Bored? But how could it be boring, being the way you are?"

I remembered her from the pub – the languor, the sleepy eyed look. I see her now... she's not unhappy, this woman, but she *is* bored. She's seen things, experienced things that make her life, the way she lives, seem trivial, empty, spiritless. But I'm reassured that it *is* life she seeks, not death, though what manner of life, I cannot imagine.

"It's more than reading minds Derek, this thing we do." She fixes me with a smile, then asks me if I have a coin. I take a coin from my pocket and she tells me to put it on the glass-topped coffee-table between us. I do so and she tells me to cover it with my handkerchief, but my handkerchief is not clean and I am ashamed to take it out. She feels this, and tells me to cover it with my hand instead. I do so.

"Now take your hand away."

When I lift my hand the coin has gone.

"You do conjuring tricks too?" But even as I say this, I know it wasn't a trick. The coin has actually dematerialised. I feel the hairs rising on the back of my neck.

"Now I've frightened you," she says. "Forgive me. Take a deep breath. And another. Relax. It's all right, really. I'll get you some water."

"I'm fine, Sunita. But... what *are* you?"

I feel the swell in her throat then. She reads minds, awakens mysterious depths in others, dematerialises matter and goodness knows what else – and she weeps. She's weeping a little now. I've upset her. "I... I'm sorry... I didn't mean it in a bad way."

She catches my hand, then brushes away the tears. "I know how you meant it," she says. "There was such a tenderness in you. That's why I'm crying. I am not used to such compassion."

She closes her eyes for a moment and catches her breath. At the same time I feel a tingling and a warmth as something materialises between our palms. I recover my hand and open it to find a plain gold signet ring.

"A gift," she says. "A token of my friendship. Will you wear my token? Ah... I feel a change in you. I've taken you one trick too far and your rational senses are rising to your defence. You're thinking I might be a

fraud now, like poor Eddie."

It was just a flicker, as these things sometimes are, and in the mysterious way of our thoughts it has now become a seed that has taken root and blossomed quickly, shading out everything else, all the wonder, all the tenderness. I'm sorry for this, sorry and ashamed, but I know better than to say so, because I know she already feels it.

"Now you're confused," she says. "On the one hand you open your mind to me with a submissiveness and a trust that's very touching, yet on the other you now think I'm a charlatan."

"No, you misunderstand, Sunita. I do not think it, I fear it. To discover that you are a fraud – though God knows how you can be after what I've just seen – but to discover it, after all I've seen, would be unbearable. I want… so much,… NO. I *need* all of this to be true. But then you already know that."

I take her ring, and I slip it on. It fits perfectly, as I had known it would.

She's shaking her head now at something else I'm feeling, something else I'm thinking. "No," she says. "I do not want a pupil. I am not a witch and you will not be my apprentice. I want a man, do you understand? I want all of you, every corner, bright or dark, and in return you shall have all of me."

I feel my legs turn cold and my belly burns – a queer mixture of fire and ice, fear and delight, but it's enough to convey the impression to her, that I understand well enough how things will be. And that I am more than willing.

"You'll still have to teach me, Sunita. Right now I'm as muddle headed as anyone."

"It doesn't work like that. There are no lessons to be learned. You just have to be around me for a little while. The energy pattern of my mind isn't confined to the insides of my head – it permeates the space around me. So does yours. If you're sensitive, as I believe you are, then your mind will become attuned of its own accord, simply by vibrating in harmony with mine. The process has already begun. The tricks I've shown you are then simply a question of believing you can make them happen yourself."

I'm wondering if I can handle this. I mean, if I can think anything into or

out of being – I can add an extra zero to my bank account and no one will query it or think it strange because I will have altered reality, altered not just the way it is now but the way it has always been. And if we could alter reality like that...

"Not reality," she tells me, picking up on the run of my thoughts. "The illusion of it – we are shaping the illusion. Remember, Derek: all we really have are our feelings. And yes, it worries me too. You asked me what I was. I don't know exactly, but nature is a process of evolution, throwing up a variation on a theme every now and then, an experiment, if you like, to see if it will fail or surpass the status quo. That's what we are: a variation. A mutation. We are not like others. We have an advantage, but it makes their world seem dull to us. And that rather makes me wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"If we're actually meant to be here any more."

Chapter Four

I've moved house now, chosen a cottage in a leafy village to the north of town. I've spent a little money on better clothes, better furnishings, on a flat-screened TV, and on pictures for the walls, but none of these things satisfy me, and I spend my time, like before, becoming ever more quiet and still, though now I find myself also listening for the thoughts of others. Sunita told me it would be like this.

It's alarming though, these thoughts I'm starting to pick up, also the feelings of people I cannot see and do not know. I sense so many shades of unhappiness, and what little happiness I detect carries with it a pitiful fragility and I know the giggling recipient of such flimsy joy will be weeping before the day is through. I can shut these thoughts out if I distract myself, or when I am with Sunita, which is strange, because I had thought I'd come to feel ever more what's inside of her. Instead though, I find that as my sensitivity increases, Sunita increasingly guards her own thoughts against me. She tells me she does this in order to spare me what she calls her depths, until I am ready to face them.

I see her most days now. Either I drive over to see her if it is the bright lights of the city we desire, or she will seek me out if it is the quiet of the countryside. We dine together in expensive restaurants, but find the projected pomposity of these places far outweighs their culinary merit. We visit the cinema, but find the movie is already known to us, before ever the opening credits have begun. We travel out to other cities, and stay in fine hotels, which is very nice for a time of course, but one adjusts so quickly, it becomes boring. There is also the feeling of throwing money away on fripperies when so many have nothing – even if we did create the money ourselves.

It's in the cities where you find the most thoughts, and their variety is a training in itself, like familiarising oneself with a strange landscape. You quickly become adept at negotiating it, at finding the safest spots, and you discover the places it's better not to go at all. In all of this I come to know Sunita as a woman, as a friend and trusted companion.

But not as a lover.

It is only my feelings for Sunita that bring warmth, and a continuing

mysterious sense of meaning, at least when I am in her presence. Everything else bores me, as again she warned me it would. But my feelings for her have grown into something I have never before experienced. There is desire, of course, though somewhat muted by my admiration and respect, also my continuing fear of her. I remain completely open to her mind, so she is as aware of these things as I am, yet not once does she let down her own guard, so that I might know even a fraction of her own uncensored thoughts.

When we are together we behave with a controlled reserve, more like colleagues than friends, and though I sense an erotic tension between us, I suspect this is purely my imagination, and I would never be so crass as to suggest we act upon it. I may desire it, but I try to suppress such thoughts for fear she will root them out, though I'm certain she is aware of them. As for her, she plays her feelings carefully, like chess pieces, and though she once told me she does not want me for a pupil, I am never in any doubt who is the master in the game we have begun to play.

When I am not with Sunita, my day-to-dayness is very dull. At first I wondered if my two million quid would be enough, but since I mastered the art of materialisation, I barely give it a thought any more. If I need cash, I no longer visit the cash machine, or the bank – I simply think it into my wallet. This is not counterfeiting – the cash comes with bona fide serial numbers and does not disturb the economic radar. One moment it does not exist, the next it does, along with the circumstances to render my possession of it entirely uncontroversial. In like wise, I have also materialised a hundred golden trinkets in a single evening, merely for amusement, then made them vanish again because their ease of manufacture makes them worthless to me.

These things might sound impossible to you, but really, they are not difficult. The ability to manipulate matter and read minds is, as Sunita suggests, just a question of attunement. There is a limit of course. I cannot make or disappear whole cars and houses, or people. Mass is a factor, and I'm surmising now it must be below my own body mass. Metals I find easier to get hold of with my mind than organic matter – the stuff of life. Living things – plants, people, and even the tiniest of creatures cannot be touched, as if once sparked into life, they are protected by divine law. I find I can heal though. It's not difficult – simply a question of feeling for the natural flow of energy within living things. With a little experience you get to know what's right and what's out of kilter – then you simply bring it back into alignment by massaging it with your mind. My metatarsal problem cleared up after a

few days, and right now I'm looking and feeling a decade younger than I was.

Strange, this adjustment in my values, for none of it seems remarkable at all any more. It is as if things have always been this way. But that is not to say, as I become ever more adept, I do not fear what strangeness there might yet be to come.

Chapter Five

Today I'm in town. Sunita has invited me, though where we are to meet exactly, she's left to my imagination, chuckling down the telephone, and saying I should not really need to ask her any more. There's a café in the St George's Mall. This is where I know I'll find her. As I approach it, along the crowded streets, I'm wondering what she has in mind. The town is looking poor: doorways littered with fast food cartons, buckled pavements, ragged people begging. I have no coins with me, but by the time my hands have reached theirs I've materialised enough for a cup of tea and a sandwich. I'd like to give them more, but I don't know how far I can go with this, I mean without raising suspicion.

Were I to drop a thousand pounds into the hands of each of these poor souls – a thing that is entirely feasible – this mysterious philanthropist would make the newspapers; sooner or later he would be discovered, and Sunita has already told me that this is not our place, that above all else we should not attract attention to ourselves by acts of philanthropy, as tempting though it might be.

At first, this strikes me as – well – uncharitable, but she's had longer to think on it than me, longer to stare into the eyes of the suffering and the needy of the world. She can heal their hurt like me, by so little as thinking about it. But where do you start, and where do you stop?

"There comes a point, when it's self indulgent," I hear her telling me. "This sympathy and longing to help others."

"Forgive me, Sunita, but that seems cruel."

"The suffering of the world is infinite, Derek. To give yourself over to curing it all, would be to sacrifice yourself, to be swallowed up by an unthinking, unfeeling, unseeing and ever hungry beast. The beast of Suffering. And we were made for other things."

I find her sitting lazily, a teacup in her lap and a far away look in her eyes. She knows I'm there long before I've emerged from the crowds, knows I'm there as I come up behind her. She feels my thoughts as I sit down, so she need not even look at me, just as I do not look at her, but prefer instead to feel what little of her she will permit. And the feel of her is enough. I do not know the depths of her, but sense sufficient sweetness I am assured at least she means the world no harm. Like

the rest of us she's merely puzzled by the fact of her existence.

She breathes in, and motions with her eyes to a young couple at a distant table, their fingers entwined as they sit and stare longingly at each other.

"Do you feel that?" she says.

Tentatively, I give my mind over to the scene. I'm always careful with these things – but find myself unprepared, and am scalded by the intensity of feeling between these young lovers. I snatch my eyes away and pull my mind back to safety, fix my ears upon the Muzak and the dull roar that permeates this place, hide my head inside of it. Sunita however, I observe rides it out with unashamed pleasure.

"Such a delicious lust," she observes. "Both of them! And she looks like such a sweet, innocent thing. It's all so... *carnal*, don't you think?"

"Sunita!"

She smiles. "He's sincere though. That's lovely. I hate it when I sense deceit. It makes me want to do something, to say something, to do good, to do right by others. This is what you're thinking of again, Derek? And I suppose the gods of the ancient world must have faced this dilemma once too. But really the only way to end the suffering of the people is to grant them the gift of godhood themselves."

"And what did they do about it? I mean, these gods of the ancient world?"

"Well, they clearly left us to our own devices, didn't they? It seems there is a purpose in our perpetual squalor and our suffering, though for the life of me I cannot think what it is."

She's still looking, still enjoying the feel of the amorous couple, while to me this seems the worst kind of voyeurism. "Sunita! Please! Let them have their privacy."

Reluctantly, she looks away. "Oh, Derek, you're such a prude!" And then she laughs, and I laugh too at my foolishness. But then she says: "Is that what you would like to feel... if I let you look inside of me?"

Questions... indeed words, are never trivial with Sunita. They must be considered carefully. But she also lets through sufficient feeling for me

to grasp the answer she is thinking of. She does this in order to test the sincerity of my reply, even before I have spoken. Such are the complexities of being with someone like her.

"I see what you mean," I tell her. "I suppose the answer is yes, of course, I would like to feel that inside of you. What man would not want to be desired by a woman as beautiful as you, a woman of your depth and magnificence and mystery, Sunita. But also..."

"Go on."

"I would be... disappointed if I felt that's all there was."

"Bless you, Derek. Of course, I've always known you desire me in an old fashioned, earthy sort of way... that you try to suppress it, to hide it from me, but really it's quite useless. I also know there's more in you, when you look at me, than that. I felt it that first night. It's the feeling that allows me to trust you the way I do."

"Then... I don't disappoint you?"

"I never thought for a moment you would. But I feel your restlessness. Indeed I feel resentment in you sometimes – that I have such dominion over the secrets of your mind, while you have none over mine. I sometimes feel you trying to hide your thoughts from me, like others have done in the past, and I don't want that. It makes me fearful. I don't want to lose you Derek – but you're not ready to look inside of me yet. What shall we do about it, I wonder?"

She's thinking she might give herself to me, I mean physically, distract me with the earthy pleasures, as she puts it, and my mouth runs dry at the prospect, but for once I am ahead of her and read the flip-side of her coin, so to speak, the same time she reads it herself. She gestures once more to the couple: "You've been there once or twice, haven't you? Now you're older and you want something more, something beyond all of that. You wonder if there can even be such a thing? You fear there might be nothing, and yet you will leave no stone unturned in search of it."

"Ah... I get it! You're thinking I'd only end up wanting more than you're able to give. Forgive me, Sunita. Forgive my old fashioned desire for you. I cannot help it. You must forgive me also for savouring the anticipation of it occasionally – but rest assured, I can control it."

She returns her gaze to the couple, coyly this time and then she smiles as if in memory of some private pleasure.

"Of course, having said all that, and established the fact that we're both aware of the limitations of such a thing... it would still be a pleasant way to spend the rest of the afternoon – don't you think?"

Chapter Six

Knowing this is not everything spares me the demon of expectation, so that making love with Sunita melts the brittle edges of an ordinary pleasure, and they run easily into a pool of liquid ecstasy.

It's like the pool we gaze out upon now, afterwards, through the window of her apartment, as the sun sinks over the estuary, slips out of a dreamy sky and into the amber crucible of the sea. Meanwhile the world vibrates, I hear the humming of its energy, I feel it in my bones as I look at her, framed in the window, her figure set against the beauty of the coming night.

She sips her tea, glances back at me and smiles. She lets me feel her pleasure at our coupling, but there's more inside of her than this, I know, and she fears to let me in, but she at least lets me feel her pleasure now. Then she raises an eyebrow in query and says:

"You feel sadness?"

"Yes."

"You're guarding the reason. Why?"

"I'm afraid to say I love you because it sounds so mundane."

"No, you fear to say it because you know it is not true. Love is a human thing, beautiful as this sunset, beautiful as the inside of you when you came to me just now. But these are earthly things and fall short of the rapture we are both seeking. We pause, we gaze out, we catch our breath, we fear to go as far as we believe we are able. All of this is still so uniquely human."

She closes her eyes, materialises a key – small, golden, plain, then she tosses it to me.

"A key?"

"To my heart." She frowns. "Is that enough, do you think? A little corny perhaps? As for my mind, I cannot let you in just yet, but the heart of me is yours." She brightens. "Let's say for now I shall always be devoted to you, as I know you are devoted to me. Let the key open the

door on warmth, and love, and rest, with me. Remember this if we are ever separated."

"Separated?"

"Don't be afraid, Derek."

And thus, sweetly, she continues to guard herself.

I possess her ring and now a key, but she asks nothing in return. Or is it that these things are trivial compared with the price I will eventually have to pay for being with her, the price of being with Sunita? I materialise a modest gold chain, put the key upon it and hang it round my neck as a talisman.

"That's the spirit," she says. "Now, I'm hungry. Let's eat."

We drive out a little way to a restaurant. It's not a risky part of town, but Sunita's car is like a shiny black jewel. It carries the spotless sheen of a high-earner, the restrained class of authority. These things are much coveted in society nowadays, for being in so short a supply, and as a consequence her car has attracted the attention of the feral creatures of the night, two of whom are about to test the locks, just as we are returning to it. They are young and hooded against the security cameras, a danger in their eyes, violence in their hearts. The car is everything to them, worth infinitely more than our lives – unless we can be taken for our money first, and Sunita simply for the pleasure of doing violence to a beautiful woman.

It does not help me to feel this in them.

We stop. They look. They know the car is ours. They wonder what we will do. They leave off breaking entry and come round to confront us, to dare us to plead with them not to take it. They don't know the car means nothing, that tomorrow we could buy another just as soon as the shops open. I feel something in Sunita as she takes my arm. She means to let them have the car, if only because they seem desperate enough to take it. But it's not compassion, nor even fear of these creatures that drives her – it's indifference. She... pities them, her only anxiety being for the inconvenience this will cause us in getting home.

She draws me back a step. The creatures misinterpret this as fear and it pleases them. One of them draws a blade to tease us with. It vanishes. Sunita has dematerialised it. This confuses them, but they

cackle a little louder to cover their confusion. They begin to make filthy remarks to Sunita that panic me because I'm weak and unarmed, and I can do nothing to prevent them from hurting her.

I could materialise a gun! Yes... that would do! But would I have the nerve to use it? Maybe I wouldn't need to? A gun then... I'm thinking *very hard* of a gun. But it's complex – a mixture of materials and oil and powder. I suppose it might be possible, and like everything else, merely a question of believing in it...

Sunita is unimpressed: "Derek!" She's picked up on my thoughts and is chiding me. "That would be *really* stupid. I know I've advised you against helping others, but hurting them is equally unwise... at least... if it can be at all avoided."

This doesn't strike me as the best place or the time to be having a conversation on the moral conundrums of our unusual abilities. But anyway...

I ask: "You think it can be avoided in this instance?"

Our would-be assailants exchange bemused glances. Then she holds more tightly onto my arm, gives a sigh.

And we drop out of time.

It sounds... complicated... at least in the explaining of it, but in the feeling? It actually feels very easy. Once you accept the plasticity of matter, I mean accept it in the very core of your being, you can play with it in many ways. It's all a question of applying your mind to it. But the other thing you can do with your mind I can best describe as a sort of stepping inside of it. Really – you just step inside of your imagination while the world goes on without you. You keep your own local time, your body time, I suppose, and the world keeps its.

From the perspective of our assailants we become ghosts, literally fading into air. I don't know what they make of this, though of course I hope it scares the shit out of them – but then I'm still mostly human and a little childish in this respect. To Sunita and I, the experience is rather different, and the effect is of materialising inside a space that she has prepared over the years of her training.

"Welcome to my waiting room," she tells me.

We're standing inside a white-painted, wooden pavilion. There are two easy chairs, and a wicker-work table with a pot of tea that appears to be steaming, freshly made. Surrounding us is a spacious garden, ablaze with colour. The sky is blue, the sun is shining. It feels warm, with just a light breeze to render it all comfortable. She's still holding my arm and it's just as well or I'd fall over.

"Take a moment to adjust," she says. "Here, sit down."

"I'm imagining this?" I cannot hide the tremor in my voice as I speak. I thought I'd seen it all, but this...

"No," she says. "*I'm* imagining it. Do you like it? It used to be more ornate, and bigger with houses and hills and waterfalls and things, but just recently I've had a clean sweep. Back to basics. An English Summer Garden!"

"Impossible..."

"Not really. Like all things it's easy when you know how. And it's better than sitting in a dark cupboard. Where would be the pleasure in that?"

"How do we get back?"

"By wishing it. But I suggest we wait for half an hour or so, time enough for our would be assailants to clear off. Tea?"

"Em..."

"It's better to go with the experience than to fight it," she soothes, the teapot poised over the cup.

"Go on then. Tea would be nice."

The tea tastes real, tastes good, refreshing, but I'm too unsettled by it all to enjoy it properly. "Is it real?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"And what manner would that be then?"

"Do you think the places in your head that you go when you're asleep aren't real?" she shrugs. "They're real, but malleable – everything in them is shaped by your thoughts. Imagine demons and demons there

shall be. Imagine unicorns?... you get the idea. As you can imagine it can be a strange place, without reference, without geography, or any kind of physical law, but with practice you can firm some of it up enough to at least remain stable while you're in it. That's what this is. We can walk around the garden if you like."

"I'm fine here."

She smiles and points to a gate in a yellow bricked wall, overhung with clematis and honeysuckle. "Through there is an open paradigm," she says. "A place where anything is possible. Think of it as the untamed wilds of your imagination. Think of this as a holiday home on the borderland of the extraordinary."

"Have you ever been through the gate?"

"No, the wall is the first thing I imagined – something to keep the wilderness at bay."

"Then why put a gate in it?"

She smiles. "The wall itself demands it. And a gate, with a little keyhole. And I suppose I didn't want to feel this was a prison... that one day I might step through to somewhere else. You must do the same, invent your own resting place like this, then you can go there if you need to."

"Am I... capable of that?"

She twinkles at me. "Oh yes. It's just a question of believing in it, Derek." She consults her watch. "Ready to go back?"

"If we must."

"Then take my arm."

The transition from one place to the next, from the imaginal realm to the literal, is uncannily natural, like waking from a dream. One minute I've drifted off in the middle of a real life drama, to find myself daydreaming of a walled garden and taking tea with Sunita in her summer play-house. The next I am remembering that I'm actually standing in the street on a cold winter's night. But by this time the creatures have gone.

The car's still there. Sunita looks at it for a moment, then says. "Let's leave it. It feels dirty now. Will you come back tomorrow, and drive it to the dealer for me? Trade it for a new one?"

"Em... yes, of course."

"Thank you. And Derek?"

"Yes?"

"Stay the night with me?"

She reads my assent, my astonishment, my trepidation... all of this, but mostly my assent, and we walk with a relaxed ease across town, a mile or so back to her apartment.

"Did it frighten you very much?" she asks. “I mean those men.”

"Yes."

"Give it time. You need never fear that sort of thing again. You will never need to think of guns."

"I'm sorry about that. It was childish. But Sunita, where did we go?"

"Go?... Nowhere, my love. We just stepped inside for a moment. That's all."

I'm thinking to myself: *can things possibly get much stranger than this?* Sunita reads my mind and is subliminally sending me the answer. Then she smiles and takes my arm once more.

"Really, this is just the beginning," she says.

Chapter Seven

I lie in the cool, crisp linen of her bed, Sunita drawn up snugly to my side, breathing gently and at peace while she sleeps. There is a growing acuteness in all that I see and feel about me now. Indeed, my world is becoming one entirely composed of feeling. I do not merely see the room, I feel it. I do not hear the faint rumble of the city outside, I feel it. Even the luminous markers of the bedside clock become defined by the feelings they instil in me. My world has changed. Its material reality has been rendered so insubstantial as to appear meaningless. It offers me no sense of value, danger, or excitement. Even the finer emotions of love and compassion seem childishly inappropriate now.

I wonder what she's dreaming of – and unexpectedly am granted a picture of her seated in a white room, a circular chamber with tall pillars, and a domed ceiling. She is white gowned, and white curtains billow in a hot wind that blows in through glassless windows. She's thinking. This is her thinking room. The view from the windows is changing, cityscapes morphing into snow streaked mountains, rendered blue by their immense distance. But there is no pleasure here, no sense of clarity, no matchless wisdom, only that same loneliness and longing, that same ache – except here it's overwhelming. No... it's unbearable!

She senses my presence and turns, surprised to see me there and I am pushed out of her dream by the pressure of her recovering self, to find myself re-focussing once more in the bedroom and to her physical presence beside me. I'm thinking it was like dipping my brain into warm water – but that it was also a grave violation and I am ashamed of it.

She's stirring. She speaks, her voice still heavy with sleep. "Derek? Was that you?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Sunita. I was only looking at you and wondering what you were thinking, what you were dreaming. I did not mean to pry... I did not expect to be allowed in."

She curls her hand around my arm and snuggles closer. "Hush now. It's all right."

"But I've disturbed your dream. Really, I'm sorry."

"It was not a pleasant dream, and I am glad to be disturbed from it. What did I reveal to you?"

"It was like the loneliness of all the ages, like you'd been in that room since the beginning of time."

She stirs, draws her gown about her, then crosses to the window and looks down at the city. "I had not meant for you to feel that. You're becoming attuned more quickly than I thought."

"Are things really so bad for you?"

"It's the price we pay." She sighs. "I must tell you that you are not the first man I have been with. I mean, like this."

"I didn't suppose I was."

"The others... they were expecting... I don't know... to find some kind of bliss inside of me. When they realised there was not, they were afraid; they wondered what the point of it all was."

"What happened to them?"

"They left me, or I left them, or something. You know how it is? I must ask you again: have you the courage to face what you felt in me just now? Have you the courage to feel it yourself?"

I stand with her at the window and gaze down at the city. It's an hour before dawn yet already it's coming awake – strings of lights beginning to flow along the highways, office lights coming on.

"All of this," I tell her, pointing to the city, to the hive of human activity, "it seems so unremarkable to me now. I cannot go back to it – knowing what I know."

"But is the price you'll pay worth the gift of viewing things the way we do?"

"Price?"

"You are a compassionate man, Derek, but through this process of attunement, you will lose that compassion. You will come to realise you cannot help the world without it consuming you, so you will hold

yourself at a distance from it. And then, like me, you will begin to wonder what you are still doing in it. You'll feel ever more disconnected and begin searching instead for the door that will allow you to leave it. Eventually, there will come a time when you'll look at others, and all you'll see are ghosts. And when that time comes, you'll feel more alone than you had ever believed possible."

She brushes my cheek with her fingertips. I feel unshaven, crumpled. I feel unworthy. She knows I feel it, rejects it, and yet...

"We're reaching a point of no return," she says. "Should we stop now, do you think?"

She is implying we have a choice.

"The attunement is not yet fixed in you," she explains. "If we do not see each other for a while, it will fade, and you will go back to being the way you were. You will return to blindness. Would you not prefer it?"

The answer comes through clear enough: "To have seen once, and then be blinded seems cruel, Sunita. No, I cannot go back. I cannot be without you, without this way of seeing and being."

She nods. "I shall make arrangements. We need to be alone, away from the noise. But once you are attuned Derek, and it is only a matter of time now, there is no going back for beings like us."

I tell her I understand, and that I’m happy about it, though in truth I doubt it, and I know she can read those doubts, yet she does not comment upon them. And I have to wonder about that.

Chapter Eight

In the morning I return her car to the dealership. Its facade speaks of opulence, but beneath the gloss the feel of the place is one of unsuspected impoverishment. The salesman is better dressed than me in a beautifully fitted suit, his hair-cut is extraordinarily fine, and he shines like a movie star, yet he lives poorly, faces the imminent threat of redundancy on account of his poor sales record, and there is something in the field of his energy that suggests he's only a short time away from a heart attack.

How I hate this knowledge! What use is it, if I'm supposed to sit by and do nothing?

I hold my thoughts at bay, not wanting to intrude any further. To help him would be easy. All right I *can* bring his sales targets up to scratch, it would be a mere clerical adjustment, and I can plant the thought in his manager's head what a fine chap he is. Also, I can put my thoughts into his misshapen energy and... all right... there it's done. All of it. But a part of me is thinking he will probably only mess it up again because it's in his nature.

Is that the first inkling of the waning of my compassion?

Sunita hasn't told me what sort of car she wants, so I pick one pretty much the same – just a newer model, but otherwise so very much like the first it really makes no difference: black, shiny, leather interior, class, refinement... the transaction seems extravagant, wasteful, except of course it has no real value at all to us.

When the deed is done I telephone her.

"When do I get it?" she asks.

"A few weeks."

"Did you pick me a nice one?"

"I'm assuming you guided my thoughts on it, since you didn't exactly say anything this morning."

She chuckles and then. "It was a good thing, that thing you just did."

"What thing would that be then, Sunita?"

"Saving that man's job – and possibly his life. But you should be careful. Once you start looking for things to fix, you're lost. Still... the attunement will harden you."

"Make me less compassionate... yes... you said."

"You think you're immune? That you're somehow different? That it won't affect you?"

"I suspect it may already be happening. But still, I don't see why we can't let those in need come to us, and trust in... I don't know... trust in..."

"Are you about to say God, Derek?"

"I think I am, yes. Trust in God to make the choices for us."

"Relinquish responsibility for who we save, and who we let die to a deity? I did not take you for a believer."

"I wasn't. I'm not. All right, not a deity then; to fate, to chance – to the cosmos."

Do I truly believe what I am saying? How can anyone look at the suffering of the world... feel it in their bones as Sunita and I have done, and yet trust in any power that would preside over such an unruly chaos? Yet it seems... I do.

I feel Sunita's pause. She's puzzled too but does not think me misguided. She respects my feelings, as all of us who tread this way must respect the feelings of those we deal with, and she's... intrigued?

"You *have* changed," she says "Where's your cynicism?"

"I think you've cured me of it."

The line goes quiet for a while. She's thinking that I know as well as her how many desperate thoughts can come at you in a city like this on any single day, or indeed in any single hour. You cannot help them all. You have to guard yourself somehow or you'll go mad – or be discovered and then they will destroy you.

But who are they Sunita?

The world is no longer a place for saints Derek. People do not believe in them any more, and when they see what they do not believe in, they would sooner tear it apart than accept its reality! They would ignore a million acts of selfless charity and focus instead on rooting out some dark secret from your past – and if there was no dark secret, they would invent one for you.

But who are they Sunita?

Words, Derek... open any newspaper... any blog, any web page. This is a world of words, incapable of feeling, incapable of genuine meaning – just babble and blather... finger pointing and name calling...

She's letting me in! I feel the doors opening a little wider. Such pain! Darkness! Frustration! Anger! Sunita, is that really you?

The door closes again.

"Welcome to my world, Derek." She pauses, and then says: "It's time we went on a journey together."

Chapter Nine

I meet her at the railway station. I'm still shaken by what I've seen in her and am growing more fearful that to enter Sunita's mind is something I am incapable of surviving. But is that not the point? What we are attempting is to explode our normal mode of thought, explode our consciousness, our respective psyches, weld them into one. Is it another plane of consciousness that awaits us? Or merely madness? Are we not mad already?

She has planned a trip for us, north, to the quieter regions where she says we need not be so mindful of the minds of others. She allows me to feel she is preparing the ground for letting me in, smiles an uneasy reassurance and is not fast enough to hide her anxiety from me. While we wait for the train to arrive, we buy coffee and newspapers. The newspapers are full of words, and none of them are – not lies as such but imaginatively selective, manipulative... catalysts for the manufacture of a feeling that is not genuine. It interests me. The world is so different now. I see through it.

She smiles at this, looks so beautiful, so elegant in a suit and a long coat, her hair glossy and voluminous. "No second thoughts then?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?"

I'd toss the paper into the bin, except there are no bins for fear of bombs – and that is the only genuine thing I feel in the world these days: fear, suspicion. The world has lost its trust, and its courage that things can ever be any better than they are now. It is the first step towards oblivion.

"Is that all you feel?" she asks. "The fear of the world?"

"No, I also feel good that I'm travelling with you. Perhaps it's the natural way for people like us to live – to move around a lot."

"If we ever return from this, I think you'll find it is the only way."

"We shall return, Sunita. We have no choice."

"Oh?"

"You're picking up your new car in two weeks."

"Ah! Fate! Trust me Derek, it is by our own thoughts we manufacture our fate, as surely as we manufacture our reality."

"Not if we consciously abdicate control, and simply trust things to work out for the best."

"Such a thing as that, Derek, takes more courage than I possess."

The Edinburgh train rumbles in, and we take our seats in the comfortable hush of a first class carriage. People glance at us as we pass – well, they glance at Sunita. She impresses them, warms them, makes them hungry for the mystery of her – it's the grace in her that draws them, also the confident authority her powers permit her to indulge in. It makes me smile. They can never know what it is I know. Really, they would never believe it.

So, we're on the train, the populated areas of the North of England slipping behind us. Ahead are the twin cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. They form a belt of populated noise across the country, and beyond them a vast gulf of emptiness: the Highlands. Sunita owns a cottage somewhere in its remoteness. As is our way, she hasn't told me this but I know it, and she knows I am looking forward to seeing it. And that I am looking forward to it, makes her happy. These are simple things. Perhaps you take them for granted, but from my perspective one realises they are the most important things in the world.

We are travelling at two hundred miles an hour, lost in daydreams, gently fending off the myriad thoughts of our fellow travellers, when suddenly I am gripped a peculiar vision – a length of railway track is broken. Daydream? But this has a *feeling* to it – it feels like shock, disaster, destruction, twisted metal, broken bones!

Sunita looks at me. Her brows are knitted together. She feels it too. I look about for the communication cord, but if I stop the train and it was only a dream, how do I explain myself? If I stop the train and it *was* a premonition, again, how do I explain myself?

Sunita has no intention of grabbing the cord and drawing attention to us. Instead, she is feeling along the train with her mind, wondering if she can cause a malfunction that will bring it harmlessly to rest, but it's too complex a machine – she does not understand it, and fears to make things worse. Then she realises she can pull the chord with her

mind, some distance along the carriage where no one is sitting – it will not draw attention to us – but never mind that: just *do* it Sunita! *Do it!*

It's too late.

The carriage gives a lurch and there's a roar as it leaves the rails. Then there's a violent, mind-jarring judder, violent enough to rattle my teeth. Sunita takes my arm and closes her eyes, just as the window beside us shatters into a million stars.

We don't step into her waiting room – the garden and the summer house – perhaps she had no time to conjure it up – and instead we seem to fall a distance of a few feet, to land in darkness upon the sleepers of the railway line. I don't understand: we were travelling at two hundred miles an hour, yet we land upon the ground at rest?

Sunita breaks the heel off her shoe. This makes her cross, but considering the fate we have just narrowly avoided it seems petty to me. She takes a moment to re-materialise it. Ahead of us, at a distance of a few hundred yards there now lies a mountainous wreck of lights and twisted metal. She takes a breath – shocked, unsteady, then holds my arm for balance while she fixes the heel back onto her shoe.

"You've just saved my life," I tell her.

"I don't know – injury certainly. You can buy me dinner if it means that much to you."

I sense in her only frustration at the inconvenience of having our journey interrupted. She's looking around. We have no idea where we are. The landscape is bleak, low hills, remote... not a single lamp to indicate even a house, let alone a town. It's also cold.

"I think there's a road over there," she says. "It must lead somewhere."

"But... Sunita!"

She reads my thoughts. "There's nothing we can do," she says. "Our first thoughts must be for ourselves."

"There may be people we can help. We *must* help. We *must*!"

She gives a sigh, reluctant to indulge me at first, but I play upon her feelings for me, and she relents. "All right. But we must be careful not to draw attention to ourselves."

That there are people tangled up in the mess is too horrific to contemplate for now. I have never faced such a thing before and I don't know the first thing about it, but if it's only to hold someone's hand while help arrives, I'm thinking I must do it. I scamper uncertainly along the track, in the pitch dark, while Sunita trails sullenly behind, taking her time so she does not break her heel again.

There are people beside the embankment, some still crawling from shattered windows. It's not the carnage I was expecting – the mass of twisted, bloodied bodies. Rail carriages are cleverly designed, but they cannot work miracles. There must also be many fatalities hidden in the wreckage.

A man is sitting on his suitcase, apparently contemplating the scene. He looks more like he calmly stepped down from the carriage than crawled through a broken window.

"How long since we crashed?" I ask him. It's a stupid question of course and it puzzles him, but I have to reset my watch or I won't know where I am.

"What?" he says. I've taken him by surprise and I feel a strange energy about him. "Weren't you in it?"

"Em... yes... of course." *Foolish, Derek. You're drawing attention to yourself already*. These are Sunita's thoughts. "We... we went back a ways looking for a road, but there's nothing. Anyone seriously hurt?"

He shrugs. "They're saying there are bodies further up the line – it'll surely be dozens once they start to untangle things."

He's buzzing with something, and trembling a little too – cold perhaps? though he's wrapped up in an overcoat and wearing a beanie hat. Shock then? I try to read him and am puzzled when I detect what I can only describe as a kind of arousal. It's almost... ugh… sexual. Perhaps I'm looking at him strangely, but I feel a shift in him, as if he's closing himself off. He's suspicious of me.

I'm about to say something else, probably only to make things worse, when Sunita steps out of a gathering mist, and now I read

astonishment in him. She ignores us both and heads into the mess of tangled wreckage. She moves like someone who is not quite a part of it – her graceful gait, her poise – she looks like someone walking a red carpet amid the gaze of cameras, and not like someone who has just survived a train wreck. She's only doing this for me. Had she been on the train alone, she would be stepping into a taxi now, heading for the nearest hotel, then a shower and a change of clothes.

I turn back to the guy, but he's gone – suitcase and all. Strange! I hear cries for help now: moaning. Sunita responds coolly. I take a breath and make to follow her. I was the one so keen to get here, but now I'm not sure I can handle it: the pain, the stench of traumatised machinery. It's overwhelming, filling my head.

A helicopter is already circling.

Chapter Ten

I'm in the hotel bathroom, now, showering blood from my face, my arms and my hands. It's not mine; it's the blood of people I have touched, and tried to help – mostly in vain I'm afraid. Then I wrap myself in a robe and ease my aching body upon the bed. Sunita has produced a bottle of brandy and pours me out a large measure in a plastic beaker, then presses it into my shaking hands. There's a news bulletin on the TV, dramatic scenes, an aerial survey of the wreck, and words... blather... blather... they know nothing, *feel* nothing, so they take something that was *something*, and are turning it into *nothing*.

I feel useless. Those who died would have died anyway. Those who survived would have done so without my help. I'd been looking for – oh, I don't know – someone trapped who I could have released by de-materialising bits of metal, or straps or something. Pathetic. Childish. All I did was hold hands and hug distressed people... and their suffering has made me ill. I could not keep it out.

And Sunita?

She thinks I did not see – at least until now. But I saw her mend a man's broken arm. It was a mangled mess – and him lying half sensible, thank God, or the pain would have been unbearable for him. She took it in her hands, as if she were comforting him and when she moved away, the arm was straight and clean and tidy again. But throughout it all she felt nothing of the horror, felt no... compassion. She did not feel sick for all the suffering, as I did. She just did it, because she could, and because I had dragged her there.

Idly, she flicks off the TV. She's looking at me now – something in her eyes. She's reading something. What? Is it my guilt she sees? My shame?

"Derek?"

I'd been unable even to comfort the people, so I'd turned away, sat upon the embankment a little way apart and looked on with the blank eyes of all the other walking wounded. They'd been numbed by it – their minds too dazed to see any of it as real, but this was not enough to spare me the storm of their thoughts, and beneath the muffled wrapping of their shock I'd felt the rawness of their distress, and

realised I could only survive my transition into whatever I was becoming by learning how to...

"Shut people out?" she says.

I take a clumsy gulp of brandy, splutter on it, then hang my head.

"Derek, you are not like them any more," she says. "You have no choice in this."

"I'm realising it's easy to help a handful of people you chance to meet along the way, like that guy at the car dealership this morning, but there were just too many tonight. Too many!"

"Yes. Like the world is too many. We may not be entirely human now, but we are still flesh. And that makes us vulnerable. And like humans, we must find a way of dealing with that. But now we should rest. We'll hire a car tomorrow and continue our journey north."

"But won't they want to speak to us?"

"Who?"

"The authorities – we were witnesses."

"Oh, but there were so many witnesses, I don't suppose they'll miss us, do you? Anyway, I've taken care of it. We were never on the train. So much faith is placed in computers these days, and they're the easiest of things to interfere with. Our names appear nowhere in the manifest. I've erased our presence."

"There are probably security cameras with our faces on them, getting on the train."

"Ahead of you: all gone now."

"People saw us – we helped them."

"Then already we are the stuff of legend, of myth. This is how it must be for us. We are the eternally disconnected, Derek. What we *are* disconnects us from everyone else."

We breakfast late, reserve the room for one more night, then turn out into Princes Street in order to replace the travel things we've left

behind in the wreckage of the train. It bothers me – the thought of those things. They are too many, and too fragmented to dematerialise by now, and from this distance, but Sunita assures me there is nothing in them that will point anyone curious enough to rummage through them in our direction. Still, I feel curiously hunted, and I know better than to ignore such things these days.

We are returning to the hotel, when Sunita consults her telephone for the latest news on the incident. "Listen to this," she says. Then she quotes: "Police are appealing for a well dressed couple, Caucasian male, South Asian female – smart, long hair – red high heels -– seen at the site of the train wreck – to come forward. Red high heels? Someone was paying attention."

"Any pictures of us?"

"No."

"Can I see?"

She hands me her 'phone. "They don't know anything," she says, "not even why they're looking for us. We were unusual, that's all – not so dishevelled, though how they can say that when I had a big hole in my stocking is beyond me."

"Maybe someone saw you mend that man's arm?"

She sighs. "I knew I shouldn't have done that – it just looked so... unpleasant for him. But... no I was very careful."

"*I* saw you."

"Only because you read my mind before I did it, and thought to yourself *my god what is she doing?*"

"Yes, but I was also thinking if we can *mend* broken bodies..."

"Go on?"

"Then we can also?..."

"Break them?" She raises her eyebrows at this. "We can apply energy to restoring living things to the way they ought to be, like you did with your troublesome metatarsals. That's the extent of my knowledge, and

I have no wish to explore things any further. To interfere with living biology in a disruptive sense is..."

"Is what? Impossible, or just unwise?"

"It is conceivable we could take a life, do it quite easily in fact, but I would not do it, just as I would never think of striking another human being, though I might understand the general principles and at times be tempted. Yet, there are plenty would think nothing of it – so it's just as well these gifts are rare."

"But how? How would you do it, if you cannot disrupt a living system? I mean I assume you cannot dematerialise a person."

"No, but we might manifest something within the system that should not be there."

"Such as?"

"Derek these things are as well not spoken of, and I don't know why we're speaking of them now."

"Okay, but such as?"

"Well, since you asked how about a stone in your brain? Or an ice cube in your heart?"

She sees I am in a kind of horrified awe of the possibility, and she frowns. "Personally I would prefer the ice-cube. Less traceable." She's joking now, but also troubled. "Derek,... do not think of these things. Ever!"

I distract myself by scrolling down through the blather on her 'phone. "They're making us out to be some kind of heroic double act. That we were... an inspiration to others – well, that was you. I... I was useless... but... this is good, isn't it?"

She's unconvinced by my change of subject. "Don't let it go to your head. Like all celebrity, one minute we are heroes, they next they are tearing us down. They'll be saying we caused it next."

"What?"

"You know how things are with the media. If there's no suitably

sensationalist story, they'll make one up."

"Are you sure there's nothing they can trace us with in our luggage?"

"Don't look so frightened. Even if there is, it changes nothing."

"But what if there was someone on the train and they're staying in this hotel? What if they recognise us?"

She pauses for a moment, puzzled, as if she had not considered the possibility. "I don't feel anyone. The accident would still be fresh in their minds, and they'd stand out against the noise. You'd feel them too. There is no one, Derek."

"Still... we should move on. Get out of this city... just in case. Don't you think?"

"To cancel our reservation now, to change our plans would draw attention – computers notice these things."

"You could make it lose the records, like you did before?"

"It would be impossible to know which computers would be alerted... I need... specifics."

"No, it's just one computer at the moment. The one in this hotel. And you're being evasive."

"Still, there would be too many unknowns." She smiles soothingly, but for the first time I sense her guile, and I'm wondering why. "We'll be all right," she says. "Look, if it would ease your fears we can stay in the room until tomorrow. I'm sure we can think of something to occupy ourselves." She rolls her eyes at me suggestively, but I'm growing out of her ability to waylay me by the promise of sex. Well, most of the time.

"All right... it's obvious you know very well how to get around me."

She smiles. "Don't try to make out you are not willing, Derek. Once aroused, you are a most earnest lover.

"But tomorrow we must leave early. No hire-car. Nothing to tie us back to this city. We take a train. Pay cash for the tickets. We could fry the security cameras as we come to them..."

She glances up mischievously. "Security cameras? You mean like that one?"

Of course, there are cameras everywhere: on every street corner, on lamp posts, under the entrance porch of the hotel – and those are just the ones we can see. We are the most watched society in the whole of human history, yet paradoxically we are apparently also the most vulnerable to violent attack.

I am able to crack its lens quite easily, which is momentarily satisfying as it is the first time I have projected my mind to a distance beyond my own hands. I do this more out of spite than anything because I do not like security cameras. Sunita restores it, then gestures with her eyes across the street. "You missed that one."

"All right... all right. I get it. They could pin-point us by simply following the trail of broken cameras."

"No, I mean we can very quickly become paranoid. And there is no need. Really, I am not being evasive. I *can* erase the hotel computer – there it's done – feel better, now? It'll cause some confusion in the morning when we try to check out, but never mind. Don't you see, manipulating reality is like lying... if you tell one lie, you will almost certainly have to tell another to cover up the first, and then another and another. I'm not saying it's wrong to manipulate reality, only that you should be very clear in your mind what will be the consequences of your doing so. And the fewer people it impinges upon the better for us all."

"I... I just don't understand how you can be so... so... indifferent to all of this."

She thinks for a moment. "Yes... good word: Indifferent. I am *indifferent* to it. If you want the plain truth, Derek, I believe we are not meant to be here any more. I just don't know where else we are supposed to go."

She takes my hand then, suddenly, impulsively. "When you are fully attuned – and it won't be long now – and I open myself fully to you, and you to me, remarkable things will happen. A door will open, and we will step through into the kind of life people like us were meant to lead. You do still want that don't you?"

"Yes. More than anything. I told you. I can't go back to being the way I

was before. And the only way, as I see it, is forward. With you."

"I am glad." She lets me in a little, then. The inside of her feels confident and calm – indifferent, yes, but perfectly assured of our invulnerability, our safety. She does this so I will take comfort from it, but there is also a challenge in her, always a challenge: Have I the steadiness she asks, to trust her? Really trust her? I think I do. Or at any rate she fills me with such an inappropriate boldness, I tell myself I don't care. I manage a smile. "All right. So... what now?"

"Lunch, I think."

"Lunch? You think of eating at a time like this?"

"My darling Derek, for people like us, genuine pleasures are so fleeting and so few – but the taste of a good meal is at least one of them."

We choose a restaurant a little way off the city centre. It's a modest place, but we feel the thoughts of those working there, feel it as a happy place, a place where there is pleasure taken in what they do and I can think of no better recommendation. But we are distracted by it, and in our eagerness to find a table, we neglect to pick up on the one stray thought that might give us away.

It's someone from the train.

Chapter Eleven

I feel him as we sit down, then glance cautiously in the direction I'm feeling and spy a lone man in a long coat, and a beany-hat.

Ah, him! I remember him now.

It had been a confusing evening, distressing... disruptive to my psyche, and I had completely forgotten him, forgotten his strangeness, but just as I recognise him now, I know he's likely to recognise me, or if not me exactly, then at least Sunita, because *everyone* remembers Sunita.

To leave or stay makes no difference now, so we wait to see if he *has* recognised us, and I'm not sure yet. He's looking at her – but not with his eyes, not yet, but with his mind, and he's feeling... what exactly? Is it only desire? I have already felt this a hundred times in her presence, the instinctive arousal of helpless men – and yes it makes me uncomfortable – so I must filter this out and search for something else, feel for the unusual.

Sunita, infinitely more sensitive to the subtleties of this game, avoids looking in his direction, and says quietly, her expression neutral: "Yes, he recognises us."

"All I can feel is that tiresome carnal longing you invoke in other men."

She allows me a brief smile – modesty, embarrassment, even pleasure at my jealousy perhaps. "Forgive me Derek, but sometimes it can be flattering for a woman to feel this, you know? But what he's feeling, what he's thinking... it has an unpleasant edge to it."

"Unpleasant?"

"Yes, it's more what he would like to do to me, and less of what we might do for each other. This man is greedy and rather full of himself. And also... ugh,.. did you feel that?"

I felt it, yes, and I hesitate to share it with you – so dark a thing it was, and were I not totally assured Sunita could take care of herself in any situation, I would be afraid for her. Still, I am sensitive to her feelings and would not have her exposed to anything so base. "Shall we leave?"

"Not just yet. There's something about him, something... strange. And interesting. I wonder how we missed him."

"Does it matter? Let's go, before he latches onto us."

"I remember him from the crash," she says. "He was sitting to one side like some sort of spectator, and what I felt in him was pretty much what I'm feeling now."

"I know. I remember him too. But I can't do this, Sunita. I'm going to have to filter him out. This is too disturbing. Surely he must be some kind of..."

Sunita isn't listening. She bites her lip, considers the possibilities, then sighs in sudden recognition of something. "Do you feel that?"

I try to read him some more, but there's a change in him now; I can see him sitting there, but his mind is inaccessible. He has become opaque. "What is it?"

"He's one of us," she says.

"What?"

"He felt us reading him, and now he's blocking."

"But, if he can block, he knows we can read... that you're trying to read him, and that's why he's blocking."

"That's why I've stopped. It may be that he doesn't know it's us, trying to read him. He's scanning the room, trying to pick up on who it is. We must both block him. Do it now. Don't let him read you, Derek."

"But won't that give us away too?"

I detect something else in her now, something that should worry me, but before I can feel it out properly, she slams down the shutters. "You're right," she says. "We'd better not linger." There's an edge to her voice that alarms me, now. "He feels dangerous. Let's go."

As we leave, I try not to make eye contact with him, fail briefly, then snatch my eyes away to safety. But the strange thing is, while others in the café are glancing up at Sunita, as is always the way, it's me he's

looking at now. I block him with everything I've got, but I can still feel him probing the boundaries, looking for a way in. The effort leaves me exhausted, leaves my sinuses stabbing. But surely our opaqueness gives us away? That he can read nothing in us, puts us squarely on his radar?

Out on the street, we let the crowds fold over us and the feel of his probing fades. It's like I imagine the scent that dogs follow – easy enough if there's just the one clear trail, but in a profusion of trails, it's hard to tell the signal from the noise. I feel momentarily safer, but Sunita's demeanour has changed, become alert, defensive, and this worries me. It worries me also that she won't share her reasons.

“What did you mean: dangerous?”

But all I can get out of her head is that she's thinking the sooner we leave the city the better, and I agree. I don't know what it is I'm running from, now. But I sense the authorities are the least of our worries, that it is now the beanie-hatted man we should be worried about.

Chapter Twelve

We take the first train out of Edinburgh, north, for Inverness. For all of her supposed indifference to the authorities, Sunita periodically consults the news on her phone. I would have thought she could sense them, that the technology was not necessary, but she says it is more convenient for homing in on specifics. They are still looking for us, but they have no facts, and the stories grow ever more bizarre – though all are now in agreement we were somehow connected with the derailment.

Sunita's ethnicity is now approximated, somewhat inaccurately, as "Middle Eastern", a term mentioned at every opportunity. She is annoyed by this: "Middle Eastern?" she says in disbelief. "I knew this would happen."

Indeed she did. One minute we're mysterious heroes, the next they're conflating us with a broad miasma, plotting the overthrow of the western world. I make the mistake of asking her where in fact she is from, that I would have said South Asia, India.

She sighs, looks at me patiently. "No, Derek. I'm from Coventry."

"I meant...."

"I know what you meant. And yes, all right, I have family still in Jaipur"

"And your father – you mentioned your father to me? Is he still there?"

"Jaipur or Coventry?"

"Sunita, I sense your anger, sense you may have suffered bigotry, and racism in the past, but I'm merely... enquiring, and since you won't let me in any other way, I can only do it by asking questions."

She takes a breath, restores her composure. "I'm sorry, but the world irritates me. Such ignorance, such hysteria over the slightest thing. It is another reason I am keen to find ways of moving on from it." She lets me in a little. "My father still lives in Coventry. My grandparents are in Jaipur. You think if I explained this to the newspapers it would alter their criminally erroneous suspicions about me?"

"Fair enough. I rather doubt it."

But I no longer care about the newspapers or their stupid stories. Indeed there is only one thing I have come to care about and that of course is Sunita. "Your father does he?.... know about you?"

"You mean, does he know what I am? Yes, it tends to run in families. However, for now we should quiet our minds. Others may be listening."

It's a quiet train. Not many passengers. We stroll the aisles after each stop to absorb the thought-impressions. There is nothing untoward – just the usual preoccupations of your average human being: the need to be loved, to be valued, the weariness at feeling small. It surprises me that even the most self-important looking people, the expensively suited, the immaculately coiffured, hide the most basic and ill founded insecurities. It makes me want to put my arms around each and reassure them things aren't anywhere near so bad as they seem.

Quieter still is the train we take from Inverness, the one that snakes its leisurely way west, to the isles. We have changed into more casual clothes now: sweaters, jeans and training shoes. Sunita has deliberately plucked a hole in her jumper, mussed up her hair and scuffed the toes of her trainers – a reaction to press reports that seem obsessed with her immaculate appearance. I tell her, try as she might to the contrary, she will always stand out in a crowd.

She smiles at this, is possibly flattered, I don't know. Her mind is sealed tightly, no thoughts, no noise escaping. I have no way of knowing what she's thinking, what she's feeling. This defence is not aimed at me in particular, I realise, but at others like me, like us. And though we have surely left him a long way behind now, she is still thinking of the beanie-hatted man.

I remember our earlier conversation, about being possessed of such abilities as these and how to avoid their use in hurting others. But I suspect now not all our kind are so sensitive, that they might represent a threat, not only to the ordinary, but also to us. Otherwise why would she feel afraid? We are still, after all, flesh.

"Sunita, are we in any danger?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so. The security services are tightly stretched at the moment. They will not act unless they see us as a direct threat.

And the newspapers will have forgotten us by tomorrow."

"I wasn't meaning them. Not the security services, or the press."

"I know what you meant."

She smiles her reassurances, presses my hand to her thigh, but I note she does not deny that we are in danger.

The landscape is magical now, dark green beneath a sullen sky, cloud-truncated mountains all around us, and silver lochans, strung together like pearls, and I can feel the spaces between the minds of the people on the train, so that now I can detect – wait – is that... the humming of the earth? But overhanging all of this is a heaviness, an atmosphere of threat that I was ill-prepared for; I had thought Sunita invincible, that nothing stood in the way of her purpose, but now, I don't know, and that I don't know makes me truly afraid.

The end of the line is the Kyle of Lochalsh, then a bus to Broadford on the Isle of Skye, then a long taxi-ride to a place so remote we have to walk the last mile of a barely passable track, to a lone cottage. It sits on the west coast, overlooking a long lonely stretch of beach, and in the distance, resting atop the steel grey waves, I can see the thin black line of the Hebrides. The light is very different here, the contrasts are sharper, but the feel of it is more liquid and dream-like than I am used to. And I can feel the earth quite clearly now. It's eerie – not alive or anything, at least not in a simple way, but there are colours to it, moods, and tides... What is that?

"A reflection," says Sunita. "Of all the thoughts, the moods, the fears, of all the people in the world."

"You mean like the collective mood of mankind?"

"Yes, but there's not much you can learn from listening to it. It's just there. Sometimes you'll sense a shift in it, something deep and powerful affecting lots of people, but again there's nothing you can do – you can't change anything by it. If you listen to it carefully, there is a rhythm underneath the noise. That is the true rhythm of the earth."

She takes a key from under a plant-pot and lets herself in. It's an unassuming little place, in the style of the Western Isles, but with a modern interior: stripped, clean, comfortable, warm... unfussy.

"Are we here to be quiet?" I ask. "Or are we hiding out?"

She lets me in a little – seems hardly self assured now, not nearly so indifferent, and this really unnerves me. "Sunita? Please..."

"Derek, listen, I should tell you I don't think the train crash was an accident."

Chapter Thirteen

Not an accident? I'm a little slow in grasping this. "But the rail was broken. We both felt it."

"I know, and it confused me. Sometimes our abilities include prescience but it's rare... and random."

"But my winning lottery ticket, that was prescient."

"No, it was a manifestation of your will."

"Okay. But we both still saw the broken track ahead of time..."

"No, what we saw was what we usually see: the inside of someone else's head, only this time it was as they manifested their own will."

At last I am able to make the connection: The beanie-hatted man! He'd been thinking it, thinking a broken rail, thinking it into reality! He had broken the rail, derailed the entire train, with him on it. "But why would he do that? He might easily have been killed."

"Sometimes attunement can corrupt us. He's bored, as I am bored, as we all are bored who walk this path, eventually. What you and I seek is something akin to the spiritual, the cosmic, the mystical. It is the only safe way, the only honourable way to make use of the gifts we have. But others fear this thing, they fear to lose themselves in it. They turn back, and seek instead more vulgar thrills by using their powers in darker ways. You dematerialise a piece of line so it cracks open, and then you see how far you dare ride the wrecked train before stepping inside your head, like I've shown you, like when we avoided the car thieves. Remember? What greater white-knuckle ride can you think of than that?"

I remember his arousal when I'd found him sitting by the track, surveying the wreckage like a spectator, and I shudder at it. But it makes sense now.

Sunita picks up on my thoughts. "Exactly. I can think of no other explanation."

"You knew this when we saw him yesterday?"

"Yes. I read it in him before the shutters came down. I've heard stories of people like him. I was not sure if they were true, and certainly he's the first I've encountered from that darker side. I'd wondered if they were just cautionary tales, tales to keep us on the right lines, you know? But now, I know for sure, there are such people after all. And now I am asking myself, does he know that we know? Because if he does, then I don't know what he will do, or what he is capable of, but it will certainly make us of interest to him."

I'm thinking: a man like that, at loose in the world, possessed of all our abilities, using them for destructive purposes – it's terrifying!

"We're safe here," she says. "Here we will feel the thoughts of anyone approaching even a mile away, and we can step inside to avoid them. But it won't come to that. No one will find us here."

"I wasn't just thinking of us. I was wondering what other destruction he's been responsible for in the past, and what else he might be planning."

"We're better not thinking of it. Here we can be together, where it's quiet, until your attunement is complete, and then... we shall see."

This should be good news – to complete my attunement, because I had wanted nothing more than to give myself to Sunita, to open myself to her, mind to mind, and feel the atoms of our being explode as we reach a mutual resonance. But how can we do that now?

"Derek, what are you thinking? You are closing yourself to me, hiding your feelings. Let me back in."

"We have to do something about him."

Sunita is ready for this: "We are no longer of this world," she says. "He is not our concern."

How can I argue against her when I respect her so much, when I trust in her so much? But surely in this one thing, she's wrong!

"Sunita, what we're capable of makes it unwise to interfere in the world. I know I still interfere, but it's always in a well meaning way, and you forgive me this because of my inexperience. But for one like him to interfere recklessly, and deliberately, and dangerously, and without a

care for the suffering he will cause... that is unforgivable, and we have to stop him."

She raises an eyebrow in query. "Derek, we have discussed this before; we cannot cure all the ills of the world. They are too many."

"And I think I agree with you, in part. But we should at least do something about those ills that cross our path, if we are able."

"Give me one reason why, in this instance?"

"Because... he's one of us, and interfering in a *really bad way*. Which makes him our responsibility."

She's torn. "But you have no idea how dangerous this man can be. Do you realise how lucky we were to escape him? To the ordinary people of this world we are untouchable, but to the likes of him? You felt what was inside of him!"

I felt it, yes, and what I felt was someone with all of Sunita's powers pointing in the wrong direction, so I do indeed have a reasonable idea how dangerous he might be, that we were lucky to escape him, and it would be an incredibly stupid and dangerous thing to actually go looking for him..

She shakes her head, her expression dark, but I can feel a kernel of doubt in her now. "What you are saying is not wrong. But that still does not make it easy for me to agree with you. Forgive me, but I must think about what to do."

With that, she sets out for a walk along the beach. She asks me not to think of her, telling me she'll need all her powers of cognition, and without the inconvenience of blocking her mind from the probing of others, that she might even step inside for a while, because we cannot be read when are residing safe inside ourselves. It is, she says, the only truly private place. "But remember I can read you," she says. "And you must not dwell on this matter until I return. Do you promise me?"

I sense the gravity in her tone, and I know I must respect her word. "I promise."

What am I doing? I came here to be raised to the highest level of human evolution by my proximity to Sunita. Such a thing is now within my grasp. I can leave the world behind or at least roam it with the

confidence of an already superhuman ability. I need never worry about anything ever again! Yet here I am telling her we can hardly be so self absorbed when there are others like us capable of doing such harm, *that we must do something about him*.

I had wanted her to disagree with me, to convince me I was wrong, as she always does. This is no time for her to weaken, to come back at me and say I was right. Because to be right in this will be to set us off down a very dangerous path.

When she's not returned by nightfall, I begin to worry, and set off along the beach to find her, but there's no trace – just miles and miles of emptiness, no other houses to which she might have gone. I'm thinking she must indeed have stepped inside for a while in order to think, so I return, collecting driftwood on the way, which I set up in the dunes by the house, and there I light a small fire. I settle down beside it, beneath a glorious sky and continue my vigil, still without thinking of her, or at least not of the possible contents of her mind.

It's been a long road, from that squalid little flat I used to live in, to this house on the beach. As the attunement progresses, we move from the usual human feelings of worthlessness to feelings of a deep inner calm. I can manifest great wealth, yet I realise the difference between being comfortable in that squalid flat and a mansion is just a state of mind, that being comfortable as a human being is entirely a question of how you look at the world, and yourself.

Sunita has brought me every step of the way, transformed me, changed my life, my view of life, my view of reality. It's worrying of course, that it may yet corrupt me, that this creeping boredom Sunita speaks of might eventually overwhelm me, or in the case of the beanie-hatted man, turn me into a homicidal monster in search of cheap thrills. I even wonder, ruefully if all that separates me from him is the passage of a few years!

Eventually, I hear footsteps and, thinking she's come back I turn to welcome her, to be greeted instead by the beanie hatted man – and he lets me into his head only long enough for me to know his name is Saul. Unfortunately, I'm so surprised to see him, I don't think to close my mind at all.

He squats by the fire and warms his hands. "Cold night, eh, Derek?"

Chapter Fourteen

I stare at him for a long while in mute surprise, so he has to thump my arm in order to bring me back into focus. "Derek, mate?"

He knows my name? Well, of course he knows it. He probably even knows my shoe size by now.

"Size ten," he says and then: "So, where's your better looking friend?"

"You already know I don't know. So why ask me?"

"Ah... nice one. Yes. Just making conversation. Have to start somewhere, eh?"

How did he find us? Don't even think it. Block him! Block, block, block! I find that once I control my fear of him, I can block him very well, and eventually I feel the pressure of his probing fade as he contents himself with what he's already got, and stops trying to break through for more.

"So... her name's Sunita is it? And you thought she'd gone off down the beach somewhere. But you can't find her. Well no matter. I'll catch up with her soon enough when she comes back looking for you. I'm looking forward to being introduced. That's quite a woman you've got there, my friend."

"How did you know where to find us? We were very... quiet."

"Well, exactly, it was a question of trailing the silence, you see? It's like a scent all its own – silence, I mean. A gentler current to it. you know? Once you have it, it's easy enough and you just follow your nose."

"Did you derail the train?"

"Sure I did."

He feels my revulsion but shrugs it off: "Easy for you to judge, Derek, but from the calmness I detect in you, you've not been cursed with this gift for as long as I have. Eventually we all end up this way."

"But to take lives? Dozens were killed that night, hundreds injured."

He winces, nods briefly in a half-hearted acceptance of his responsibility. "I know, I know. But they're not like us, Derek. They're not worth pitying. It's no worse than stepping on an ant because it's irritating you."

"The pain I felt that night was unbearable, all that suffering. But you... you were thrilled by it. You... got off on it."

"Yes, sorry about that. You took me by surprise, otherwise I would have been a bit more discreet in my savouring of the moment. But people like us are so few and far between you might go years before detecting even the trace of one, so it's just my luck I ended up derailing a couple of my own kind as well. Look, don't be like that mate; I can assure you you'll develop a thicker skin as you go along, and then it'll take more and more to get you excited. Women won't do it for you – well, very few of them anyway, and then only for the first time. You'll become so disconnected you'll want to go around in a hair shirt, just to remind yourself you can feel anything at all." He shivers a little. "Listen, it's freezing out here. Why not invite me in for a cup of coffee? No reason we can't be gentlemen about it, is there?"

He's confident, pragmatic, brutally matter of fact in his approach – like Sunita in so many ways, except she's not a homicidal maniac. For now all I can think is to play him along, keep his mind occupied, keep it away from thoughts of Sunita, while Sunita works out what to do. But what can she do? She probably doesn't even know he's here. I want to raise the alarm, of course, to warn her, but I can't do that without opening my mind to him as well. And above all I'm wondering what he wants with us. Is it only his base thoughts about Sunita? Or is it because he knows we know he was the one who wrecked the train? I don't get it. I'm also being careless with my worries, letting them leak all over the place.

He's amused. "You think I care about you knowing it was me? What can you do about it? I'd love to hear you explaining how I did it to the authorities. They'd have a good laugh about that one. Then lock you up as a lunatic. Of course you could disappear from that padded cell – I mean I'm assuming there's not a place that can hold you for long, but you could do without the publicity, and all that inconvenience in the first place, right? Takes time to build a fresh life, a fresh identity. No, you had it the first time. It's her I want."

"What do you mean *want*?"

"Look, don't be stupid. I said most women won't do it for you any more. But some, Derek, my friend... well let's just say they stir a certain memory of longing within me. Don't be difficult about it, mate. I'll cut you a deal. And like I said, I'd probably soon tire of her, so I'm sure we could come to some arrangement. But let's talk inside. It's a long walk to this place, and I'm gasping for a cup of coffee."

Don't think about it, Derek; just play him along for a bit.

So...

I can't believe I'm sitting down to coffee with this man. Unlike Sunita, whose languor can still a room, Saul is edgy. He drums his fingers soundlessly upon the table, and when he's not speaking he purses his lips and tenses them as if to quell the rising of his thoughts.

"You can't kill me," he says. "So you can forget that for a start. Don't even think about it."

"I wasn't thinking of it."

"Hmm? Of course not. Sorry mate, I'm rambling – just playing out the possibilities. But maybe I could kill *you*... you know? It depends who has the greater power to block the influence of the other, or maybe I could catch you unawares. I could manifest a metal spike in your heart, or an icicle in your brain – anything to make you lose consciousness before you've the presence of mind to de-materialise it and mend the hole. I assume you've thought of these things as much as me. Mind if I try it?"

"Try what?"

I feel a stabbing pain in my left hand and look to see a spike stuck right through it, pinning it to the table, so I cannot move it. I dematerialise it as fast as I can, send a wave of healing energy to soothe the pain, to heal the wound. There's no blood, but it leaves me exhausted, reeling, on the edge of a faint.

Saul's eyes are wide: "Strewth, mate. I'm sorry. That was easier than I thought." He's puzzled, seems genuinely contrite. "Wait, I'm missing something here. Of course! I get it now: It's *her*! She's bringing *you* on. And there's me – hopeless chauvinist that I am – thinking it was the other way round! That you were bringing *her* on. My mistake, and lucky

you. Me? I get some grumpy old bloke for a guru. You get Sunita!" He whistles. "Wow, I wouldn't mind working under her, for sure." But he looks aside, disappointed. "Except I realise now that's very unlikely. Someone like her isn't going to be anywhere near as open to persuasion as a lesser attuned mortal – I mean like most of the other women who've temporarily floated my boat."

I'm hardly listening and catch only the general tone of casual confident menace. The pain in my hand is sickening, spreading from a localised stabbing to a widening ripple of burning, aching misery. I think Saul is genuinely contrite for the pain he's caused, and through his surprise I feel him drop his shield a fraction. He pulls it back up as soon as he realises, but not before he's given some more of himself away.

He'd imagined it would be a simple matter of killing me, that no matter how attuned I was, I couldn't be as powerful as he, and that he could take her because he believed her powers were weak, that she would be easily overcome. There are ways, ways I hesitate to tell you. I read it in his memory, ways of interfering with the thoughts of others, of paralysing them, hypnotising them at a distance, rendering them incapable of struggle. These are the kind of mind games we can play.

I shudder at what I see in him, shudder at the things he's done, the things he's actually enjoyed.

But now he knows she's the powerful one. He also knows he's just stuck a pin in me, and she cannot have failed to feel that, even if she were clear across the other side of the galaxy, that wherever she is, she will know something is wrong, and she will come.

And he doesn't know what she's capable of.

He's just read this in me, is quite still now as he looks at me and works through the permutations. Does he kill me and wait for Suniia? Take his chances on being able to overpower her defences? Or does he run? And if he thought he could kill me while he believed I was the powerful one, then what's to stop him from hurting Sunita as well, if he's as powerful as his self belief convinces him he is?

For a long while I'm feeling helpless, that I can play the permutations as often as I like, but basically sitting here in the presence of such a man as this I'm as good as dead, and he has only to think it. Then I realise there is one thing I can do. I drop my guard completely so Sunita might read me if she was anywhere near, and know what I'm

about to do, and to let her know she's to stay away from Saul, from Skye, from Scotland. For now he has the upper hand. If we're to deal with him, it has to be with the tables turned the other way.

It's not difficult, though I've never done this before and I've no idea where I'm going to end up. I close my eyes and step inside. Of course, not having as much experience as Sunita, I've had no time to construct myself a waiting room, and I'm not really sure I'm anywhere to be honest, now, because it's all black, and I'm afraid if I open my eyes, he'll still be there looking at me like I'm an idiot.

But then I think of light, and there's light, and then I think of a surrounding wall, like Sunita taught me, and there it is. It comes with a little door, even though I didn't ask for one, but I don't argue about this. I put down a gravel base, but I don't like the feel of this under my knees, and quickly change it to grass. There. I am *in*. I have stepped inside!

But what now?

I am crouching on an enclosed lawn, cradling my hand, which still hurts. I also feel sick, mainly on account of the fact that although I've escaped Saul's clutches, I don't know how to get back to Sunita. And I don't know for sure if Sunita got my message at all, and has by now materialised right into the sphere of his vile influence.

Chapter Fifteen

I realise by some innate instinct that the inside is a personal space, and you only get to share it if you bring someone in with you, like Sunita did with me that time, by making personal contact first, then wishing it. But this is no good. I am free of Saul, but also a long way from Sunita. I try closing my eyes again and thinking myself to wherever she is, but just wishing it and believing won't be enough here. I've lost touch with her.

Since all I have to go on is past experience here, I'm thinking of the night when we encountered the car thieves and I'm assuming the only place I imagine I can get back to, when I step outside again, is the last place on earth I want to be: to the very place where Saul might still be waiting.

I need to rest, to calm my head a little, then I can think about this, so I manifest a rickety shed in the corner of my space, like my father's when I was a child, and I crawl inside to nurse my hand, rocking myself gently amid the scent of creosote and leaf mould and grass clippings. I know I'm making this up, but it doesn't make it any less real, and it does comfort me a little.

If you're having trouble with any of this, it's best to think of what I'm describing as imaginary. Then you must dare to think of everything else you know as imaginary too – not that it isn't real, but rather what you think of as real is only an approximation of the way things really are.

Matter and energy are interchangeable concepts. But both matter and energy are also functions of the psyche – to what degree and by what means I don't know, but this is the unknown country Sunita and I are exploring. Ordinarily our access to energy and matter is closed off by the brain, which is not equipped for dealing with the full spectrum of reality, but only one small part of it – the illusion of immutable matter, and the time-closed life and death of all living beings.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is we are not our brains, that in fact it is our brains that limit our experience of reality. It's not that my brain or Sunita's brain is any better than yours – just a little less firm in its grip, and we have learned ways of bypassing the locks that ordinarily imprison us.

I try sending out some feelers for Sunita, but there's only silence. She said she could read my thoughts, even when she has stepped inside, but did not say if others could hear your thoughts if you were inside and they outside. When safe inside, our thoughts are also shielded, then, so no matter where she is, she cannot hear me. And I can only hear her, if she were to step back outside. And I don't want her to do that, not if it's to risk falling into Saul's clutches. That I can't hear her thoughts then is good. That I can't find a way back to her is of course bad.

Eventually the illusion of my flesh is persuaded to forgive the insult of the illusion of the spike, and returns more to normal under the gentle influence of my will. When I'm feeling better, I emerge from the shed to find the lawn now has a little wicker table and chairs, and a parasol for shade, and on one of the chairs is sitting Miss Pringle, my teacher from Primary School.

This is unexpected. And awkward, because I am now of an age suddenly to appreciate what a beauty she was. Dark haired, forties, lovely twinkly eyes and such an elegant demeanour I wonder if she was not trained in one of those Swiss Finishing Schools. I recall her deportment and her refined eloquence certainly lent her more authority than any other teacher, before or after.

Until I met Sunita, of course.

"Em... Miss Pringle? This is a... surprise."

"Hello Derek," she says, then she smiles as if genuinely pleased to see me after all this time. "Tea?"

I sit, let out a breath and think for a moment. I'm struggling with this as much as I'm sure you are. Well, let me help you: clearly this is not Miss Pringle.

She's looking at me, the teapot poised over my cup. I nod, and she pours out a stream of amber liquid.

"You're right," she says. "And maybe in retrospect it would have been better not to choose Miss Pringle. But you need company that is both female and sympathetic, and encyclopedic. Hence: Miss Pringle."

There are books at her elbow, hard covers, the illustrations being of

strange geometries, arcane, bewildering. She sees me looking. "One should never judge a book by its cover. Did I ever tell you that? But hopefully we will find the answers somewhere in these pages."

"Answers?"

"To the questions you are no doubt dying to ask me."

"Such as?"

"How do you get out of here?"

"Okay. It's true I was wondering about that one."

She nods. "Tea first. How's the hand?" She gestures for it and I place my hand in hers. She turns it this way and that, gently, examines it thoughtfully. "Well, if nothing else we'll not fall for that trick again, will we?"

"I hope not. He can't... you know... find us in here, can he?"

"Saul? Absolutely not."

"And you know this because?..."

She points to the first book, entitled: Principles of Being. "It says so in here. Think of a telephone directory. Think of finding the right person's number when you don't know their name. It's a bit like that, not entirely impossible, but so unlikely as to be not worth worrying about. And speaking of Sunita, which we weren't, you're unable to find her for the same reason."

"Do you know everything, Miss Pringle?"

"Of course not. Only what's in these books, and what's in these books is basically what's inside your head. You wouldn't need them if it wasn't so muddled in there. You always were a terrible scatter brain, Derek. But you did well for yourself, and I'm very proud of you."

"I wouldn't say I did well, exactly. Sure, I did the best I could, but the world changed. It no longer wanted me, and I had trouble adjusting to that. I'm still... trying."

"That's one way of looking at it. One might also say, you were freed in

order to pursue other things. And that you're adjusting to those *other* things very well."

I think about this, and I think about her. "You're an aspect of my own personality, aren't you? I'm basically taking to myself here."

"Of course. But there's so much of your personality you're unaware of. And I can't look like nothing. I have to look like something or that would simply be too strange, so here I am. Is the tea all right, by the way?"

"Oh... perfect, thank you."

She begins riffling through the pages of "Principles of Being". "You're wondering how to return to the material world, but far enough away from Saul so he can't find you."

"I was? Yes I was, actually."

"Well, this might be worth a try. Imagine waking up somewhere else, but familiar to you. Your own bed perhaps?"

I'm looking blankly at her. "And?"

"And there you shall be, Derek, as if waking from a dream."

This sounds doubtful, but no crazier than anything else I've witnessed since hooking up with Sunita. "All right, I'll try that. But then what? Is there really no way of finding my way back to Sunita?"

"Well, if you mean finding her at her inside place, there is an obscure reference, but it's pointing to another source."

"Which means?"

"Which means the answer is in you, but you've not made the connection yet. You need more information, you see?"

"Can't I get that from you?"

"I only know what you know. Asking me that is like creating a circular reference on a spread sheet. You must link to somewhere else first for the answer to become apparent, or anything might happen. Goodness the whole universe might disappear! But I'm joking, Derek. I've no idea what will happen."

"That's no help at all, Miss Pringle."

She appears to be thinking. "Well, who trained Sunita, do you think? Has she never spoken of it?"

"Only that it tends to run in families." I experience a rare moment of enlightenment. "Ah, that may be it then."

Miss Pringle concurs. "Indeed, I suspect it might be, Derek."

I'm not sure how much longer I can sustain this... I don't know what to call it, this bubble inside my own head. The periphery is fading, the details of the garden shed blurring. Only Miss Pringle remains firm.

"Miss Pringle?"

"Yes, Derek?"

"You look so lovely, and I'm actually older than you now. Would it be too strange... if I kissed you?"

She smiles, blushes demurely, little dimples appearing in her cheeks. "Don't be silly, dear. Now drink your tea. Then run along and play."

Chapter Sixteen

Dawn, my cottage to the north of Preston, but when? I'm alone in my bed, my phone on the night stand. It wakens to my touch, its light chasing away the last of the darkness; it gives me the time and the date: Good news! I've not gone backwards in time or anything weird. That would have been too much to deal with. It's merely the morning after the night, with Saul, on the Isle of Skye.

Merely.

For a moment the fact I have transported myself 500 miles simply by thinking about it hasn't struck me as outlandish, but then we are adaptable creatures. For now this is nothing, just another addition to the strangeness of my new reality.

I send out some feelers for Sunita. In the past this was enough to have her ringing me up. But again, there's nothing.

My first call is her apartment, thinking we might save an awful lot of time if she had stepped out there, but the place is empty, and I waste a day waiting for her. I even spend the night there, hoping that when I wake she will be there, warm beside me. But dawn comes, and I am still alone. Either she is waiting for me somewhere else, or Saul has her and she is blocking her thoughts from me, so I will stay out of harm's way instead of trying to find her.

I leave a yellow post -t note. "I'm okay. Looking for you. Call me."

After all we've done, after all I've seen, a yellow post-it note is banal, but like everything else in life, they have their uses.

I catch the train, not north this time, but south, to Coventry. Why take the train, you ask? Why not simply wake myself up in Coventry? Because I do not *know* Coventry; there is no safe, familiar environment there I can wake myself up to, never having slept there, you see? Also, disrupting reality, like Sunita said, is like lying. You tell one lie, and before long you're telling another to cover up the first. No doubt there's a chapter on that in Miss Pringles copy of "The Principles of Being". In my disappearance from Skye there is no explaining to be done. In my random awakening in Coventry, there might be.

The train is better, if not always safer – as events have shown.

So... Coventry, now. Late afternoon. Except it isn't Coventry, but a little market town nearby to which I have travelled from the station, urbanely enough, by Taxi. There are not that many watchmakers these days, so tracing one by the name of Singh in this vicinity is not difficult. I arrive as the town is winding down, some shops already dropping their shutters, the little market stalls beginning to empty.

The shop looks just like your regular family-run high-street jeweller – cheap to middle priced watches in the window, an assortment of second hand wind-ups, also jewellery, and mantle clocks ticking away inside, and a white haired gentleman sitting at a bench. He's peering into the innards of a pocket watch through a Lupe clipped to his spectacles. There is an air of patience about him, a steadiness, also an impressively powerful bearing – more a brute of a man than the aesthetic sage I had been expecting. If this really is Sunita's father he must be at least seventy, but appears not a day older than fifty.

He looks at me, my hands fidgeting nervously in my pockets. I've travelled a long way, but now I'm here I don't know what to say.

He sets the watch gently down. "Can I help you, sir?"

He speaks confidently, something friendly, welcoming in his tone, but I fear all that is about to change. I'm hoping he can indeed help me, but there's also a risk I may ruin everything by what I am about to do.

"I wondered," I ask him, "if you could take a look at my watch."

He stands, slips the Lupe from his spectacles, beams his shop smile at me. "Of course. What seems to be the problem?"

I hold my hand out, palm upwards, as if cradling something there, and I gaze down at it. Mr Singh does the same but is puzzled by the fact of my empty palm.

"Sir?"

"This watch," I tell him.

His expression changes as a watch materialises in my palm – or rather it is a lump of base metal, fashioned into the shape of a small pocket watch. It's not a bad attempt, I'm thinking, but it's definitely not ticking.

He gives a wry smile, raises an eyebrow, but otherwise maintains his composure. "Now that would have been impressive," he says. "If you'd been able to materialise a fully working watch."

"I'm just starting out. Complex assemblies of different materials are too much for me."

"Clearly."

For a moment his expression darkens. He can feel me reading him, and pulls down the shutters. He reads too of course, and blocks tenaciously. I try to block my thoughts as well, because, though I need this man's help, I'm not sure I should be here at all, nor how much I should give away, or even trust in him, even though he is Sunita's father.

He detects no threat in me, nods his assent, as if at something inevitable, lifts the counter and invites me through to the back room. He closes the shop early and we sit facing each other across a table while he waits for my explanation. I'm not sure how to begin, so I show him the ring Sunita made, so he knows I am at least her friend and not her enemy.

He recognises it as her mind-work. "So, you think Sunita is in trouble?" he asks. The matter of factness in his tone suggests this would not be the first time.

"I don't know, sir. We were together, then she disappeared. Something happened, something... unexpected, and we were separated."

The wry smile again. A brief sigh, a sense of something melting in him. "Any man who is with Sunita is usually the one in trouble. Few have the courage for the kinds of things she gets up to, nor for what she ultimately intends." He nods in greater understanding now. "She told me she was looking for another. That she had felt someone, in a city to the north. '*He's the one this time, I'm sure of it*' she told me. So... you are he?"

"I don't know. Indeed I rather doubt it."

"Well... I see you have at least achieved some rudimentary level of attunement, which is more than can be said for many of the others. But now Sunita has abandoned you and you fear a reversion to your

earlier unremarkable self. Is that it?"

"No, that's not it."

"Come now, it's perfectly understandable, and a common reaction. You are not the first to have sought me out in hope of a reconciliation with my daughter, and the continuation of your journey to a kind of minor godhood. But really you should take this opportunity to ask yourself if it is not better to let her go, if it is not better to simply revert to being an ordinary man. There is no shame in it. Indeed, there is much to be admired. Many of the gods faced the same choice, you know? Some left us to our devices, but many remained, became mortal, and enjoyed it."

Does he think Sunita found me unworthy and is now simply avoiding me? Careful of your thoughts Derek. He's wanting only to provoke you into being indiscreet. Or perhaps you would be better unguarded. Let him see the whole damned mess of you, then he will know you are sincere. That would be fine, except, just because this man is Sunita's father, there is no guarantee they have a good relationship. Except, did she not tell you how she would take care of him? Why can he not take care of himself? Why can he not materialise money for his own benefit, like she and I, in order to free ourselves, to take care of ourselves.

Am I wrong? Has he no attunement himself? Why is he scraping a living in a small watchmaker's shop? Was it someone else who trained Sunita?

He raises a finger. "One moment, please." He leaves the room briefly and I can hear him rummaging about among drawers and shelves. Then he returns and sets down in the middle of the table a very fine looking pocket watch.

"If this piece were running," he says. "it might be worth ten thousand pounds to a collector, and I assure you I could sell it tomorrow. But alas it is not running." He flips it open. "It's the balance, do you see? The fine spring is kinked and this beautifully intricate little wheel is broken."

"Okay." And I'm thinking, so what?

"Obviously the parts for such an old watch are no longer available," he goes on. "Records indicate only five pieces like this were ever made. True, the parts might exist as the remains of another such watch in a

dusty drawer, somewhere in the world. And I might find them one day, and repair the watch. Indeed this is my hope, but I have been waiting twenty years for the opportunity, and it has not happened yet.

"Now, you are perhaps wondering why I do not simply materialise the parts I need? My job as a watchmaker would then be much easier, would it not?" He pauses for a moment, concentrates his thoughts and another watch, identical to the first appears on the table, but this one is definitely ticking and telling the right time. "There," he says. "Now tell me, is the working watch worth ten thousand pounds, or is it worth nothing?"

And with this I am granted the insight that there are four ways of dealing with these gifts. One is to do good with them, as I would like to do, another is to do bad as Saul would do, but both are simplistic. Sunita explores them to their limit in order to achieve the next level in human evolution, and then there are others, like her father, who spend their lives denying them, and trying to live within the same limitations imposed upon everyone else.

Mr Singh shakes his finger at me. "Ah no," he says. "Not denying. How can one deny the existence of such things? But one must make a choice, to be accepting of the rules of the material world, or to leave it for a place where such skills as ours are more commonplace. I have not the courage of my daughter, and I rather like my life here. I will come to the next world soon enough, I think. And you must be careful with these skills, for they do risk drawing attention somewhat, and if the authorities should become aware of anything unusual about us, we would have to disappear. Our life in the material world would be by necessity nomadic, never abiding long in one place, never enjoying a deep and meaningful relationship with anyone, other than our own kind. This... this is why I prefer to lead a quiet life, Derek. And you would do well to follow my example."

There is much sense in what he says. If people were to become aware of us, they would react much as they reacted to Sunita and I on the night of the crash – either as gods or as demons. And humans bestow a shaky kind of godhood, liable to withdrawing it on a whim. But none of this matters. I don't care much about the material world, and would just as soon leave the humans to it. All I want is to find my way back to Sunita. And this man can either help me, or he cannot.

"If she was in danger, you'd want to help her, wouldn't you?"

He thinks about this for a moment, seeks to read me, but bounces off the shield I have thrown over my thoughts. "Obviously you are attached to my daughter and you are guarded with me, which is always the wiser course until we have come to know each other better, preferably by our deeds than by our words and all our fancy manifestations. But in the meantime words are all we have Derek, so... perhaps the time has come to tell me what has happened."

So I tell him about the train crash, and I tell him about Saul. And I tell him about the newspaper stories that first elevated Sunita and I, then demonised us to the level of terrorists. Then I tell him about the long journey to the Isle of Skye.

Mr Singh is actually eighty two years old. He lets me in this far, while he ponders my tale, lets me in so far as images of his wife Indira, and memories of a willowy teen I imagine must be Sunita. Another reason for leading a quiet life, he's thinking... it takes a long time to raise a child.

"I read the reports of course," he says. "Such a terrible thing. And those descriptions sounded enough like Sunita to make me wonder..." He nods, stretches his back, then gestures for my hand. I offer it with a caution that melts as I sense more the compassion in him. He examines the area where the spike had penetrated, rubs the ball of a callused thumb over it lightly.

"You did very well," he says.

I feel the remains of the nagging ache, the residue of the trauma drain away to a tingling warmth.

"It is the job of the old, Derek, to deride the achievements of the young," he tells me. "But it is not ill intentioned, more a way of protecting you, of instilling caution. But Sunita has brought you a long way. Do not underestimate your own abilities." He sighs. "Alas, there are many like Saul and you are right, something must be done about them. But the question is what? Shall we kill them all, do you think?"

"It seems wrong to kill, Mr Singh. It goes against everything I believe and everything Sunita taught me."

"And what does Sunita say?"

"She's conflicted. Why should we care about a world we're shortly to

be leaving? But how can we stand by and do nothing? I mean, what else might he have planned?"

He sighs. "But Derek, the suffering of the world is infinite. We cannot give ourselves over to the curing of it or it will simply consume us."

"Sunita says the same thing, and I'm sorry if I seem naive, Mr Singh. You must put it down to my inexperience. But I cannot believe it's right to leave a man like Saul at large in the world if there's something I can do about it. What should we do? What can *I* do?"

"For now I suggest you rest. I have a room upstairs. Familiarise yourself with the feel of it, then, as you know, you can return any time you like. And in the morning, you must think yourself back home, to your northern city."

"And return Skye?"

"No, I suggest you let that location cool for a while. I doubt Saul will still be there, but he may have left markers so he can detect your return. The more secretive you are the better, or next time it will be a spike between your eyes. Remember, though our spirits are immortal, our bodies are not, and we should enjoy them for a long as possible. I'm sure you agree?" Singh rubs his fingers together and there appears a key. "In your resting place, there is a wall or a fence, yes?"

"Yes."

"And in the fence there is a gate, and the gate is locked?"

"Yes. It was as Sunita taught me."

"And as I taught her." He gives me the key. "Turn this key in the lock and on the other side of the fence you will find *my* resting place. Turn it in the lock again to return to your own resting place."

I'm not sure how this helps and I probably appear nonplussed to him. "Em... thank you. You're very trusting."

"You misunderstand," he says. "This is for illustrative purposes, and not for social reasons. I can also de-materialise that key any time."

"Ah..."

"But I think I do trust you, Derek. I trust you enough to give you one more piece of information, and it is this: You cannot return to the material world from my resting place without my key. Nor can you return to your own resting place without it. Do you understand?"

"Understand? No."

"It is a quirk of the way things are ordered that you must go back to your own resting place first and return yourself to the material world from there. Do you understand me now?"

"Yes, sir, you said."

"Good. I repeat myself because this is very important. I would not want you to become *trapped* there. I do not use my resting place very often and it might be a long time before you were discovered."

"Then I shall be very careful." But right now I'm wondering why I would ever want to go there in the first place, and what possible help any of this is to me, or Sunita.

"And there is something else," he says. "There is a difference between Saul and Sunita. Sunita cannot lose her powers. Why? Because apart from the occasional temper tantrum, she is in harmony with the universe, which is itself always benign, never intentionally cruel. Never. You feel this, I think?"

"Yes sir, I've always felt that."

"Good. When in harmony, all things are self sustaining and the universe gives of its energy freely. This is a fundamental property of reality. Have you ever felt the energy of the earth, Derek?"

"Yes, sir... I've felt that."

"Good, then think about this also, and what it might mean. As for Saul? What sustains his attunement in the absence of his teacher – who I presume Saul has either murdered or his teacher has disowned him – are the thrills of his misdeeds. Nothing is given to one who is not in harmony with the natural order. Do you understand? Nothing! For the dark of heart, for the corrupt, the greedy, it must always be stolen, taken by force. Without his perverted thrills he would become powerless as the rest, and sure to have his karma catch up with him in the material world as an ordinary soul. Think also on this."

I look at the key, remembering now the key Sunita gave me. The key to her heart she'd said. It's on the chain around my neck. I think to keep her father's key there also. They are of a similar design. When I see them together, I make the connection, the connection I realise Miss Pringle was talking about, and that actually, I know where to find Sunita, on the inside, that I have known for a long time – that is if Saul does not already have her.

Her father is smiling. "And if I am not mistaken," he says, "you also know what to do about Saul."

I have an inkling, but the risks strike me as immense, and I look to him imploringly.

He waves his finger in response. "I did not say it would be easy, Derek."

Chapter Seventeen

The places where we step inside are not fixed, and they have no real geometry, you understand? The bounding wall represents only the limit of our influence. But our minds must make a recognisable pattern of the bounding condition, so it manifests in our imaginations as a wall, or a fence, or a hedge. But within that boundary, we are free to make whatever we like of it and the more fully attuned we are, the greater the apparent space we command. There is also a greater permanence to the things we create, the more experienced we are.

Returning to my own, rather modest stepping in place, I find only the lawn and the wall remains, and I note the grass needs cutting. Miss Pringle is no longer here, nor the table at which she sat, and least of all my rickety old shed. I hope I will see her again, Miss Pringle I mean, for there remains much in my head to be unlocked, and I can think of no finer person than she for unlocking it. After all this woman spent most of my formative years, doing exactly that.

But for now, I must find Sunita. I see the gate, and insert the key she gave me into the lock. The gate opens and I step through to find myself inside a much more generous walled garden, this time with a pretty house – yellow brick, twinkling window panes, romantic shutters and rambling roses. I gather from this that she has been keeping herself busy in my absence. I can only hope she was not too bored waiting for me, because when Sunita is bored, she is also at her most dangerously impulsive.

There is a pale blue door, slightly ajar. I enter to find her reclining on a sofa in the lounge, watching TV. My relief is immense. She does not fail to notice this, but she hides her pleasure well behind a theatrically stifled yawn.

She checks her watch. "I thought you'd never get here."

"I'm sorry. It took awhile to work out what that key you gave me was actually for."

"And how is my father?" She asks, implying she knows full well who I had to consult in order to work it out. I note her eyebrow is arched tartly, leading me to suspect her relationship with her father is not always a smooth one.

I was right to be cautious with him.

"He seemed quite... spirited."

"He also counselled you against me. He told you it was most likely you in trouble, and not me, that in fact *I* was your trouble?"

"He did. You were reading me all the while?"

She nods. "I know you were lost, anxious for me. But you were using your abilities wisely and I thought it best to let you get on with it. I felt certain you'd find your way eventually."

She knew – the whole time, she knew my every move, my every thought as usual, even from this inner place. I'm so glad to see her, to be near her again, but now I am wondering if it's wise to allow this deepening attachment. Her level of attunement gives her power over such human things as love, the power to choose, the power to deny. She could disappear at any time from my life, and could easily deal with the emotions arising from it. I most certainly could not. She has told me repeatedly this sensitivity will leave me eventually, and I will become like her. But I'm not sure I want to.

There has to be a way to include compassion in all of this. Everything, from the very beginning, has been about feeling. Feeling is the only truth. So what happens to us when all our feelings for others are frozen out?

She unfolds herself from the sofa and smiles, embraces me, says nothing for a while, but I find myself melting as she lays open her thoughts. Sunita can be aloof, sometime cold, sometimes snooty, but she does care for me, I think.

"The course on which we are bound," she says, "you cannot imagine. I cannot imagine it either, but I shall not abandon you, not having brought you this far. We will make love later, and I will see to it that you forgive me everything.

"When I felt your alarm I was afraid for you, but then I felt you checking out and I knew you were safe, that you wished only my own safety, so I stayed here. Thank you, Derek. Did Saul hurt you very much?"

"Only a little, and I don't think he intended it. He thought I was the

attuned one, that I could easily have blocked it – when in fact I didn't stand a chance."

She takes my hand and feels the hurt with her fingertips. "You did well."

"You father helped with the pain."

"I mean you did well to win my father's trust, or he would not have helped you to find me. Sit. Tell me everything. Let's see if my reading of you matches the details."

I look around at the house, the beauty of it, the rich colours, and I'm amazed. The most I could manage was a flimsy shed that barely lasted five minutes.

"Sunita, how long can we stay on the inside?"

"It depends on the degree of one's attunement. I've never tested it – days certainly. But there's a limit to what one can actually do here to entertain oneself, so it's usually boredom that dictates our return in the end."

"Hence the TV?"

"Yes, but I've found it only replays stuff one has already seen. And that becomes very tedious indeed. It's as well you came when you did, or I was about to start catching up on soap opera."

"But... food and such?"

"You think of your stomach at a time like this? Shall we invent somewhere for lunch?"

I smile, remembering the joke between us in Edinburgh. "I was only thinking we cannot last many days without food, certainly without water, and the clock is ticking here, in real time. A day inside is the same as a day outside."

"It's different here," she explains. "Here, we are sustained by the pure energy of a universal consciousness. From here we always return refreshed in mind and body. It's why I call it my resting place. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering. I mean, your father cautioned me about getting mixed up over the keys, that it was easy to get trapped here."

"Well, I wouldn't like to put it to the test, getting trapped I mean, but you can be assured we would not starve. It might be a very long imprisonment, but again, boredom would be our only enemy." She reads me now, curious. "You are holding something back. What else did my father say?"

"I've been blocking certain things, yes, for fear Saul might be listening."

"He doesn't have the same bond with you to make such reading at a distance possible. Now, don't block me. I need to know everything, and I will have it out of you sooner or later."

I let her in, reveal her father's advice on what to do about Saul. She looks blankly at me for a while, then bites her lip. I worry she might be angry with me for persisting in this, but eventually she laughs. "The crafty old goat."

"Sunita! This is your father we're talking about."

"What? You scold me? One hour with my father and suddenly you are wearing the trousers?"

She's joking – but only partly. "No. My father is right," she says. "There is something we can do about Saul. It might work, but there are risks, Derek. We are seeking to turn the tables on him but the last time, remember, he took us completely by surprise. Were he to do that again we might find ourselves entering the next life, long before either of us are ready for it. And to my mind that would be even more tedious than reruns of TV soap opera."

"You couldn't block him?"

"Prevent an ice cube or a spike in my heart? I dare say I could, if I knew he was there, but Saul has already proved to us he can be very stealthy."

"We can track him though."

"Oh? Suddenly you're an expert?"

"It's like Saul told me himself. We just have to listen for the silence, like a scent."

She thinks on this for a while. "All right, but when we step outside from here, it must be to a location he cannot possibly think of. The last thing we want is to find him waiting for us. And before we hunt him down, we must learn to conceal our thoughts, without pulling down the shutters completely. We must generate a masking noise, like him, rather than silence. We must become as stealthy as he, invisible to others like us."

Suddenly I'm not so sure. "Maybe we should just wait until I'm more attuned."

But Sunita is defiant. "We must deal with him now, or not at all, get him out of the way. Because, trust me, once you are fully attuned I will waste not another minute doing anything else in case we are waylaid again by annoying events like these. I will have you Derek. We will make love like love has never been made before. This I can promise you. And when that happens it had better be in a very quiet place because truly I fear for the safety of bystanders."

What she means is if there is anything I am lacking now it will be learned as we go along. Attunement, stealth, whatever is required. And we will succeed on this basis alone.

Or we will be dead.

Chapter Eighteen

I wake on a different continent, in a hotel in New York. It is a room, a bed known to Sunita. I hesitate to ask about it, and she declines to share, but I suspect some earlier failed affair. It is a suspicion she does nothing to correct, and we leave it at that. We commenced our lovemaking in a pale yellow room, in the house that is inside of her head. There was soft light, and lace curtains moving in a cool breeze, all I presume as she had imagined it, and we finished here.

It's morning now, and she is smiling down at me as she brushes out her hair which is still wild from our exertions.

"Better now?" she asks.

Yes, indeed, I feel much better. She kept her word, and has seen to it that I am able to forgive her everything. I don't know how we shall explain our occupancy to the hotel management, but presume she has already taken care of that via the computerised booking system, which even I can feel my way through now.

Saul could be anywhere in the world. But it makes sense for us to retreat from the scene of our last encounter, to let it cool. It makes sense also to avoid the quiet places for now, because it is easier for one of Saul's abilities to hide in silence – much easier to detect anyone blocking – in a crowd, their mental silence appearing as a hole in the normal fabric of mental noise that overlays all human presence.

My encounter with him was brief, but instructive, the more I think back on it.

We spend several days in the city, studying the psychical landscape. Sunita teaches me to hone my awareness until I am adept at spotting the quieter trails that identify the crossing of calmer, more self aware individuals. We do not expect to find Saul this way, more to perfect skills we might need in our pursuit of him.

Meanwhile, my attunement continues.

But as we settle in, my compassion for others begins to get the better of me again. One evening I am dragging Sunita along as I follow a particularly despairing trail to the Brooklyn Bridge. There, we are able

to talk down a young woman who might otherwise have jumped. Or rather, we do not talk to her very much, but I feel Sunita enter her mind and control her volition, so she is climbing away from the barrier before she realises it. And once steered away, she seems to sober up, appears embarrassed, mutters apologies and wanders away.

I ask Sunita about this, but she says it is better not to think on it for now. I ask if Saul might have used such a technique to render helpless any women he wished to use to his own ends. She nods but closes her mind to me, and does not elaborate. This is a dangerous technique, she's saying, and I am not ready for it.

On another occasion, I follow a trail of pain to a man lying in an alley. He has been mugged and beaten senseless. On this occasion, as Sunita calls the Paramedics, she looks at me, and I know what she is thinking. It is the same old story, the curse of our kind; *we cannot help everyone, Derek*. The troubles of the world are endless, and we risk only drawing attention to ourselves in their pursuit. She dematerialises her 'phone, then it cannot be traced, and manifests another with no prior history.

"Time we moved on, I think."

Seattle, Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore, Riyadh. We spend a week in each, comport ourselves as tourists, while feeling the texture of each city, and it always ends the same, with some act of charity on my part that risks drawing attention. In all of this Sunita indulges me, and as the time passes, I do begin to harden to it, as she had said I would. It is not that I come to deliberately avoid giving charity, more that I begin to unconsciously filter out the cries for help.

It's easier than you think – after all, at any moment there more cries for help than can be counted, and as one's attunement progresses, the range of one's mind widens, potentially absorbing more and more distress. And a countless number is still a countless number, no matter how big it is. The first step therefore is to stop trying to count. The hardening of one's heart begins as a necessity for survival, and ends with an attitude that might seem cruel. I ask that you will forgive me for this. I will help you wherever I can, if you are able to seek me out, or you chance across me, but I can no longer go looking for you.

As we travel, we pick up the usual news reports and always there are stories of accidental disasters: a train derailed, a plane crashing, a massive motorway or freeway pile-up, a gas explosion, a nuclear

power plant in melt-down. And with news of each, we wonder: was it Saul?

By the time we reach Paris, I am steadfastly ignoring the anguished trails which I can feel strung out over the city like a spider's web. I am not happy ignoring such feelings, so Sunita sits me down one night by the river, and allows me to feel her sympathy.

"It's all right," I tell her. "You said this would happen. If it's the price I must pay for being with you, then I don't mind paying it."

"But you are still afraid of it?"

"I'm afraid, yes, but not of withdrawing my compassion. I can find a way of living with it, if I can be assured it's all there is. I just don't want to end up like Saul."

"You won't. Do you not think I would have felt this in you before now? Had I for a moment detected the slightest trace of malice in you, I would have left you at once. But I have not. And as you have intuited, we do not withdraw our compassion. We *guard* it. I still feel compassion, but it is a thing I must control if I am not to lose my self in the suffering of others.

"Oh, Derek, you are becoming so exquisitely sensitive, capable of picking up on the slightest ripple of thought. We have no choice but to seal our hearts against the hurt now. We can do nothing for others but hope they will find their way. It is their fate. But what we can protect them from are those like us who would do them harm. I have had a long time to think about it and you were right. Saul is our responsibility and we should deal with him."

"But he could be anywhere. We've travelled half way round the world, and found not a trace of him, or anyone else like us. It might take years to find him."

"Then we must return to the last place we know he stood."

"Your house on Skye? But your father said he might have left markers there."

"My father’s right. It's possible to watch locations from a distance, places we have been. We can feel subtle changes in them that indicate the presence or movement of people. But there is also a

chance if such a window has been opened, I can feel the draught from it and gain a clue as to its source."

The thought of meeting Saul again, of having him materialise before me is terrifying, so that I wonder what I'm doing trying to find him. I feel there is a plan forming in Sunita's mind, but she is guarded with it. What bits of it I can feel, assures me we are mad to consider it. But clearly something must be done, and we are, after all, the only ones who have half a chance of doing it.

"Yes, there is a danger here," she says. "Which is why we must be quick."

She looks around for bystanders, but there are none. Then she lays her hand upon my arm and the next thing I know, I am waking up in the last place either of us wants to be.

I wake with a start, feeling vulnerable at my sudden and unexpected nakedness in Sunita's bed. She is less reticent, and slides quickly to her feet. "Come, we must be quick."

"But why are we naked?"

"Because, my love, that is the way we normally end up when we sleep together... I mean... eventually."

She is pulling on her jeans and a shirt, urging me to get up. While I dress, she moves about the house, feeling for a residue of Saul's former presence – anything that would give him away. By the time I am hopping out of the bedroom, looking for my other shoe, Sunita has completed her sweep of the house, and is reassuring me: "I can't be entirely sure but it feels clean. There's nothing. He left nothing."

I return to the kitchen, see the chair I was sitting on, and the table to which Saul pinned my hand. The mugs we used for coffee are washed and standing on the drainer. Very decent of him.

"Nothing except that," I tell her, pointing to a yellow post-it note fixed squarely in the middle of the table. On it is written a six digit code, half numbers half letters. Underneath is the name Saul and a smiley face.

I think I know what it is: "Looks like a flight number."

"Yes, Derek. Also, I think, an invitation."

“Invitation?”

“When we are bored, we invent games to amuse ourselves. It seems Saul is playing games with us.”

“Games? Don’t be fooled. The last time I was with Saul I had the impression he only wanted one thing from us, and that was you.”

Chapter Nineteen

We can read minds, we can manifest small objects, devices, tools, manifest wealth without limit; we can interfere with anything computerised even at a distance by finding its local network connections; we can disappear into thin air for as long as we like, and we can reappear more or less anywhere that is familiar to us from having slept there before. It's infuriating then that if a mind is closed to us, or rendered inaccessible by distance or design, we are as clueless as anyone else when trying to predict someone's intentions.

We are left guessing.

I consult my 'phone, search for the flight number. "It's a daily service. Manchester to Frankfurt. Is he saying he'll be on that plane?"

"If he is," says Sunita, "I would sooner not be flying on it with him."

"Then he intends crashing it?"

"He is capable of it. After all it is only a moderate step up from derailing a train."

"Then he is issuing a challenge. He means for us to try to prevent him. He dares us to get on that plane."

She shudders at the thought. "This is my first impression, yes. But it makes no sense. After all, how can we prevent him crashing it? Once he causes a malfunction in mid-air, it is beyond us to repair it. We would end up having to bail out the same way as he, leaving everyone else to perish. There seems no point to that."

"We could stop the plane safely on the ground – give it a puncture or something."

"But which day? Are we to set up residence at Manchester airport with the sole aim of preventing that one flight from leaving, indefinitely?"

I admit it does sound ridiculous. "But what else can he mean by it?"

Sunita looks around, feels a chill suddenly and hugs herself. I'm also edgy, and far from comfortable being here again, but how much of my

fear is imagination I don't know. "You feel something?"

She shivers. "Oh... I was just wondering. How will he sense when we have read this? We have been away for over a month. Perhaps he is watching this space after all."

"Well, that may be so, but unless he's found a different way of getting about than us, then we should have a little time before he gets here. And why would he come, knowing we'd probably already have left by the time he arrives."

"Well, yes, exactly, unless..."

"What?"

"What if he... had the nerve to actually... sleep here?"

I feel him before I see him, like a darkening in my head, and a knotting of my gut, a kind of psychic self defence kicking in at the memory of some past hurt. Then Saul appears framed in the bedroom doorway.

It's true then. He slept here that night. He was not afraid of Sunita, and bold enough to sleep in her bed, so turning this house into a portal through which he might step at any time.

Instinctively I move my hands away from the tabletop. Saul smiles at this. Obviously he could just as easily pin me to the chair through my legs, though I'm hoping I have sufficient power now to block his manifestations. Our minds are closed, Sunita's and mine, the shutters slammed down from him, and unfortunately also from one another. We need to work on this, find some secure channel of communication that we can keep open while blocking others.

Sunita stares at him and says nothing.

"Here's the deal," he says. "You render yourself open to me," looking at Sunita. "Or I'll go on the thrill-seeking spree of a lifetime. Or maybe I'll just watch planes blow up in the sky over my head. Incredibly easy to do, you know. My own, personal firework display. Imagine that?"

"Why should we care?" she says. “You know people like us have no compassion for others.”

"No, I know there's compassion in the both of you, because I've felt it,

and it makes me sick. And I know you've been looking for me. You're looking to stop me. So,... how about it?"

I've a fair idea by now what "rendering herself open" to him means, and I'm obviously unhappy about that, but Sunita gives a shrug and casual smile. "All right," she says.

Saul is taken aback. "What?"

"Why not? You're a good looking man, and I'm sure you're fit enough. It'll be fun."

Saul thinks about this, suspects deceit, and he'd be right to, at least I hope so. "Now you're trying to protect him," he says. "Well, that's very noble, Sunita, but I'll want all of you, and any way I choose. And it might get rough."

Again the shrug. "Sure. Don't think I haven't felt that in you. Indeed, I can probably show you ways you haven't thought of yourself. As for Derek, he's fully attuned now, and can take care of himself."

A metal spike lands gently upon my thigh, and clatters to the floor. Saul had indeed tried to pin me to the chair with it. But I am blocking with everything I've got and anything he tries to manifest inside of me gets pushed out to the outside of my shield. I am not fully attuned – Sunita is bluffing in that respect – but it seems I am stronger than I was. The question is how long can I maintain it?

And what is she thinking?

I can't believe how calm she is, how composed.

Even if she gives herself to Saul, he will still go around thrill seeking in his uniquely destructive way, because that is his nature, also the way he maintains his energy, his powers – and all this presumably after he has found a way of killing us both. So this is not what she means to do – I mean give her self to him. She means to trick him somehow. I wonder if she's thinking of our original plan.

"We're wasting time, Saul," She holds out her hand to him. "Or are you one of these men who's all talk?" Then to me. "Derek? A little privacy if you don't mind."

She is, she is thinking of it.

"No," says Saul. "You don't get it, sweetheart. You open yourself first, lay your mind wide open, understand? Then I can parade your pretty little bones around like a marionette. Full control. You know how it works. You're there, but there's not a damned thing you can do. You have no power over your body, only what I allow. What tiny bit of you is left is crouching in a corner of your head looking on while I roam as freely as I like, both inside and out."

Sunita thinks on this. "Well, clearly Saul, I find that option rather unattractive, and obviously it isn't going to happen. Any man who comes to me as a lover, does so on equal terms or not at all, as Derek will testify." Again she offers her hand. "But I will still go with you, on equal terms. So, how about it?"

“And you’d do that, why? Convince me why you'd even want to.”

“Because a few hours with me, Saul, might trigger a different phase of your attunement – a more permanent one, a more wholesome one. It might bring you back into the light. Turn you from the darkness. And that would save both Derek and me an awful lot of trouble.”

"I doubt that would work," he says.

But he's tempted. What man wouldn't be? But he’s clearly not thinking straight, and I watch with some satisfaction as he moves towards her, reaches for her hand. I am not afraid of him touching her – quite the opposite now. You think perhaps I should be turning over the table in outrage at this point – anyone with half an ego would be. But it's not like that. And why?

Because as soon as he touches her they will disappear. Sunita will simply step inside with him, take him to her resting place, then step out again, leaving him there. And without the key to her gate, there he will remain for as long as she chooses. A year might do it. Maybe two to be safe. And when she returns for him, if he has not been driven insane by boredom in that time, she will bring him back an ordinary man, depleted of his powers, and mostly harmless – or at the very least not lethal in a supernormal sort of way any more.

I am not thinking of this, you understand? I’m just telling it to you after the fact, that this is the way things will go, or rather should have gone. I leak nothing of these thoughts, but he finally senses the danger in her, draws back his hand and nods. Then he points to the post-it note on

the table. "Next flight's tomorrow," he says.

"Oh and Sunita?" He gestures to the bedroom. "Nice underwear."

Chapter Twenty

We stand well back on the beach and watch as the house burns. Sunita has no further use for it and has placed fires throughout, manifesting more where she sees fit. I had not thought of this ability until now, the ability to manifest flame but it is the easiest of all things, requiring only the thought of combustion and its projection in space. The flame of course takes its own shape. It's also useful for rebuffing contact with another person – not immolating them, of course, but applying a shock of heat in their direction, though of course this will not work with Saul.

The house makes her feel dirty, she says, so she purges it with a purifying flame, but its loss still saddens her. And her sadness reassures me she is not so cold as she sometimes tries to make out. She had grown fond of it, and there is a heaviness about her as we watch it burn. When one can shift in and out of focus as we can, it is a comfort to have somewhere conventional in the world one can call home.

"We'll find you another place," I tell her.

She nods, takes my hand and the next thing... we are waking in her flat, on the waterfront, by the old docks.

She spends a long time in the shower, as long as it takes the dusk to turn into a fiery sunset. I am watching the last flickers of it when she steps out wearing a robe and looking thoughtful.

"I would not have gone with him," she says. "You know that? I mean not in that way, not the way he was suggesting."

"I knew what you were planning." Or at least I had hoped that was it. "It nearly worked too."

She smiles. "No, Derek. We were clumsy. Again. But clearly you have a thicker skin and can now resist his attempts at physically harming you. At least while your back is not turned."

"It's a small comfort. Saul's stealth worries me. It worries me too this unhealthy obsession he has for you."

“I can take care of myself, Derek.”

“You can’t lie to me Sunita, even if it is to protect my feelings. I know he worries you.” But there’s no use dwelling on this. “What shall we do about tomorrow's flight?"

"I've cancelled it," she says. "Technical difficulties are listed on their computer diagnostics. They will spend the day taking that aeroplane apart and putting it back together again. I'm sorry to have to cause them so much work. But no one will be catching that flight tomorrow."

I’m relieved to hear we will not be getting on board either. "Is this the new compassionate Sunita?"

She laughs. "No. It is the Sunita who will catch Saul, somehow."

"He couldn't... you know? There was no way he could actually have... forced himself inside of your mind? Made a puppet of you?"

"None of us are invincible, Derek. And yes, he does worry me. Of course he does. A man like Saul, he might have found a way of breaking in. But if I should ever feel myself yielding in that way, I would sooner manifest an icicle in my own brain, than let him succeed."

The sun winks out with a last flash. "We're no nearer catching him, are we?"

"No. But look on the bright side. We are at least another day nearer your attunement."

"If I were stronger, I might be of more help to you. But I get the impression that as well as catching Saul you're having to keep one eye on protecting me.”

"You underestimate how far you've come, Derek."

"Nowhere near as far as him."

"But already you have gone much further. And your attunement will be permanent. The universe feeds you freely and unbidden. He will always be hungry.”

Permanent or not, the sheer muscle power of his attunement is like a tsunami. I'd felt its pressure when I was trying to block his

manifestations, and I could not have resisted for long. Such a thing is like a staring contest, and the first to blink dies.

"Then maybe maybe… maybe we can just leave him alone, Sunita… I mean… think about it..."

“Oh? you’ve changed your tune? Tell me?”

“The path he's on is unsustainable, right? It's also like us trying to do good, the hunger in the world is insatiable and will destroy us unless we withdraw from it. But it must be the same with him, only in reverse. The more thrills he experiences, the more he'll need, and all the time bigger and more dangerous. He’s going to burn himself out sooner or later, or just kill himself in the process."

"But that might be decades from now. Imagine the damage he can do in the meantime. And you are only trying to protect me, much as I appreciate the sentiment.”

I sigh. We are at an impasse. "Then what shall we do?"

"In the morning we shall pick up my new car, then we can drive to the airport and make doubly sure that plane does not leave the ground. If Saul intends boarding it, he will be somewhere in the vicinity."

Her phone gives an urgent chirrup. She consults it, does not recognise the ring tone. "Ah... how thoughtful of him."

"What’s that?"

"Saul has found my email address. Sent us boarding cards to print out for tomorrow.” She moves her hand upon the table and they manifest themselves. “I see we are in the same row of three. You by the window, me in the aisle."

"And in the middle?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Now there's an interesting possibility," she says. "I wonder if he means it for himself. Perhaps we should let that plane leave the ground after all."

I was afraid she was going to say that, but before she can read me, her phone begins to ring. She does not recognise the number. Sunita frowns, dematerialises it.

I note there are no boarding cards for the return.

"Either way we will not need them," she says. "Now, you should do the same with your 'phone. Get rid of it. Saul may be able to track them, and I would rather rest peacefully tonight. We'll obtain fresh ones in the morning"

I look around, feeling a sudden shiver. Sunita reassures me: "To the best of my knowledge he has never slept here. I think in this respect my apartment is still private. Or would you prefer we stepped inside until morning?"

I know it's cowardly, I know our place is to be in the world, not forever hiding from it inside our imaginations, but I can't help myself. "Your place or mine?"

She smiles. "Mine I think, unless you have been busy with construction, in my absence, though I shall expect it one day, my love." She takes my arm, makes ready to step inside, hesitates a moment when she feels my fear. "Come, let me distract you with some of those things I was telling Saul about."

"Things?"

"The ones I told him he could not imagine, Derek."

I take it back: there are times when I wish I could stay inside of her for ever.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sunita likes the feel of her new car. It has a complexity and a hurtling mass beyond anything she can manifest herself. As she drives I tell of how her father manifested a fully working watch.

"We must have an intimate knowledge of a thing," she explains, before we can re-create it. "And my father knows about watches."

There is nothing in her tone to suggest either affection or antagonism when she speaks of him and, of course, her thoughts on the subject are carefully guarded. But still I wonder, and dare to ask the question more directly: "Sunita... you and your father?..."

"You are correct," she says, reading the unspoken part of my question. "We do have certain issues. But basically these boil down to the fact that in spite of our best efforts and our desires to the contrary, we do not understand one another, so in that respect we are no different to most families."

She's still guarded in her answer and I venture to learn no more, but introduce instead an unsubtle change of subject, still on the subject of manifesting matter. "Your house, in your resting place... you manifested that. It was a large, complex structure."

"The inside of us is different. We can manifest anything there. Indeed, as you know, we must manifest *everything there is*, or there would be nothing. Only physicality restricts us, as it restricts the scope of our minds."

"And if we eventually succeed, in bringing Saul inside, he cannot hurt us there?"

"Interaction on the inside is by consent alone. He will be detained there, that is all. We cannot physically touch him, and he cannot touch us."

"But last night... you and I..."

"Making love? Derek, that was by mutual consent. Trust me, the inside is a safe place, even if it belongs to someone else. Only in this so called material world are we vulnerable to material harm."

I detect an impatience in her now. She's thinking ahead, to the airport, to what we shall do, and my questions are not helpful. I sound like a child asking forever "why?".

We have no clear plan of action, except that we shall take our seats on the plane - the seats Saul has chosen for us, and hope he sits between us. But there's a sense of desperation in this, and in the hope that Saul has not the foresight to see the danger in it for himself, or do we really imagine we can out-think him?

He sits between us. Sunita places a hand on his arm, and they are gone. She takes him to her resting place, and leaves him there until he is weakened. It sounds simple, doesn't it? But this is Saul we're talking about.

The sun is morning-low over the Motorway as we head south to Manchester. She slips on a pair of shades, settles back in her seat and, after a quick glance around for policemen, puts her foot down. The vehicle gives a subdued roar and hits a hundred in the time it takes me to blink.

"You're still fond of some of the thrills of the material world then?" I ask, my feet slightly braced.

"Oh yes." She grants me a smile. "Fonder since I met you, but only because since meeting you the world has not seemed so dull."

"You'd better keep me around then."

"Oh, I intend to, Derek. Believe me, I do."

That the car will do a hundred seems not to impress her for long, and I feel her nudge the accelerator a little more. There is plenty in reserve and I am pressed back into my seat as the tachometer twitches briefly into the red. But there's a cop car ahead, and Sunita slows rapidly.

"No sense drawing attention," she says. "Remember, Derek: the golden rule of our kind is discretion at all times."

Our flight departs at 10:00. I am now sitting in the airport lounge, pale faced, my hands trembling a little. My neighbour, a jolly old fellow, dressed like a country doctor in a tweed suit, assures me we will be in Frankfurt before they have even had time to serve drinks, and that I

should not worry. He does not fully understand the nature of my concerns –thinks perhaps I am afraid of flying. Naturally, I do not enlighten him, but I thank him for his advice.

Sunita looks grim as she reads me. I am observing the seats in the lounge filling up, and for each soul that sits down I am thinking their life is in our hands this morning. I am thinking that if Saul causes a malfunction of the aircraft, I will have to listen to their screams all the way down, or at least until the point at which I bail out. And then how will I feel, saving my own skin, knowing I might have spared theirs by not allowing the flight to leave the ground in the first place?

I'm thinking: *is it not too late to stop this, Sunita? To play a dangerous game is one thing, but to do it with all these innocent lives is quite another.*

She replies in kind that the plane will not be leaving the ground with us on board, that, as soon as Saul takes his seat between us, she will smile at him with a seductive sweetness, place her hand on top of his and that will be that...

We hope.

Come weekend, she reminds me, we will be scouting the Highlands for another cosy hideaway to replace the one we have lost, and where we can finally come together as she intends.

The best laid plans though...

The old gentleman has clearly adopted me out of sympathy and chats inanely, even after our flight is called and we make our way to board. He means to keep my mind off the journey and stays glued to my elbow. Sunita allows herself a discreet chuckle at his sweetness. Saul is nowhere to be seen, nor do we feel him as a trail of silence amid the noise, though we are both listening hard for it. Perhaps he means not to show up. Perhaps he merely means for us to travel to Frankfurt.

But then why those particular seats?

I feel myself wanting to walk backwards, to back away from the plane. The boarding tunnel is rendered all the more claustrophobic by the old gentleman, chattering on and preventing me from tuning in to more of what Sunita is thinking.

Perhaps Saul is already aboard?

We are seated near the rear of the plane, yet are among the last to board, so we have a good opportunity to scan the passengers as we make our way down. Surely planes are not normally so cramped as this? All these people?

Saul is not here.

We take our seats: me by the window, Sunita by the aisle, the empty seat between us. But what's this? The old gentleman has followed us and is squeezing himself between us. Can he not leave me alone?

I ask him: "Are you sure this is your seat?"

He checks his boarding card, lets me see. Yes, he's in the right seat. "I don't mind swapping with either of you though," he says. "If you wish to sit together."

It's gone wrong already. I don't know what's happening now.

The game has become too complex, the possibilities too many to predict. And I'm thinking: *break it* Sunita, *break the damned plane*, because there's no way we can risk taking off with it. We had been so certain the middle seat was for Saul.

I'm feeling along the aircraft with my mind, along the structure. I feel a mish-mash of alarmingly thin aluminium panels, and rivets and pipes and wires, and a mad thrumming of electronic and computer activity, but to interfere with any of it might not affect the plane or be noticed until we are airborne. The tyres then? Blow a tyre! But I can't find it, and now the plane is moving and the air hostess is up front demonstrating what to do with our life-jacket as we taxi away from the terminal. I fear the jackets will be of little use after a dive from thirty thousand feet into the North Sea.

Then comes a muffled report, and the plane lurches a little to one side. There are screams. The plane stops, and the engines cut to a more comforting silence. Sunita is looking at me – she found the tyre.

We scan the cabin.

I feel a ripple of something now, a scent of silence in the jangled psychic landscape that is all around us. Then I feel a void, beside me.

It isn't that the old gentleman has vanished. It's more that I cannot feel his thoughts any more. Is he blocking me? Is this man also one of our kind and we did not recognise him? Sunita feels it too, is puzzled. But the old man's eyes are closed and he is sitting very still.

She reaches over gently and touches his wrist. "Sir?"

Nothing.

The man is dead.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I felt no pain in him before he died, which is the only blessing I can think of under the circumstances. I would have felt that, I'm sure – the alarm of pain, had he suffered. But it was as if he had simply switched off, or been switched off. And Saul's purpose in this? I don't know, but a dead man on a commercial flight causes a considerable fuss, and those seated next to him become of great interest to those in authority. Again, why Saul would want this, I don't know.

The captain orders the evacuation of the plane, the doors open and vehicles are summoned from the terminal to collect us. For a while Sunita and I sit, the cabin darkened and claustrophobic with bodies jostling for the exits. I observe through the window a bus come to take us all off. Is this chaos somehow an intended diversion? Where is Saul in all of this? Surely even a man of his abilities cannot stop a heart from anywhere in the world, merely by thinking about it?

He must be somewhere near.

Our dilemma is this: do we leave the plane, leave the dead man, find a place where we are unobserved, and step safely inside ourselves, or do we stay and ride this peculiar situation out? What would Saul expect us to do? If I knew that we might safely do the opposite, but as usual, where he is concerned, I am at a loss to fathom him at all.

As the passenger numbers thin, a stewardess approaches. Sunita makes the decision to attract her attention.

"I think this gentleman is dead," she says.

The hostess turns very pale.

I read dismay and an inability to comprehend how she will cover this in her paperwork, and still maintain a punishing schedule. We have definitely spoiled her day. She is rather a beauty, as hostesses often are, but behind that smile, I detect a disappointing level of compassion.

Sunita is able to leave her seat, while I remain trapped by the gentleman's considerable girth. I would have to literally climb over him to extricate myself and this seems disrespectful. I wonder if this is part

of Saul's plan, for I am now more than an arm's reach from Sunita – difficult to escape inside together. I tell her to go, to exit the plane, to slip away, to vanish, but she fears this is what Saul would expect, so she remains with me. I cannot disembark until the man is removed by the paramedics, by which time our faces will be well known, our names taken, the interest of the authorities drawn. We might even be remembered from the incident with the derailed train!

You are wondering perhaps why we do not simply step inside and disappear right there in front of everyone? But in wondering this you are also forgetting Sunita and I must do no harm, and to vanish into thin air in front of so many people would be shocking to them, possibly damaging. Yes, I know we vanished in front of the would-be car thieves, but they threatened violence and were deserving of it. We are also most likely observed on camera here, and such a thing would hardly be discreet.

The bus fills with passengers, and departs, but Sunita and I remain trapped aboard by the fuss surrounding the deceased old gentleman.

"Go, Sunita."

"No, Derek."

"How do we know Saul doesn't intend keeping us both on board? What if he... sets the plane on fire or something."

"If he had intended that, the old gentleman would have been put in the aisle seat, trapping us both. And in the case of fire, we would not care who saw us disappear. It would be a matter then of least harm, rather than no harm." Sunita thinks on it for a moment. "We remain safest by doing what he least expects. But at least the plane is secure. One life in exchange for so many does not seem so bad. It's a pity though. He seemed like such a nice man. Oh, the dilemmas of existence, Derek. Is it not better we transcend them?"

The paramedics arrive. He is confirmed dead and stretchered out of the cabin.

Nonplussed and highly alert now, Sunita and I make ready to disembark at last. As we approach the exit, two uniformed policemen enter. One of them wears a high-vis jacket and carries a machine gun. The air hostesses look sheepish and avoid eye contact with us. I touch Sunita's arm and give her a look to convey my feeling that this might

be a the time to disappear, and to hell with harming anyone's mental health over it. She responds by gently brushing my arm aside.

We can handle this, she's saying. We can bluff it out.

She sighs, untroubled, but growing impatient. "They will likely split us up for questioning," she transmits. "Be careful what you say. But remember also they cannot harm us. The worst thing that will happen is they will discover our identity, and we will have the inconvenience of creating fresh ones. As soon as it's possible for you to step inside, discreety, do so, and we will meet back at my resting place. Okay?"

"All right."

We are deprived of our passports and invited for interview by security officials. The tone is polite but I can read the understandable suspicion in them. The armed policeman has slept poorly, missed his breakfast and is a hair's breadth from becoming irritable. A black car sweeps up as we descend the steps of the aeroplane. The rear door is opened by a plain clothed brute of a man, and with a last buoyant wink at me, Sunita slides in. "I'll see you on the other side," she transmits, and then: "In the mean time be as discreet with your account as you can. I shall do the same.″

I make to follow but am barred from doing so by the man's hand pressed roughly in my chest. He slides in beside Sunita and the car drives off at self important speed.

Another car draws up for me. And all along I am wondering if this is what Saul intended, to separate us in a public place and under heightened scrutiny. Or was it merely to demonstrate his prowess at remotely dispatching an innocent man? What possible thrill is there in this for him? How does it bring him nearer his goal of taking Sunita?

I am accompanied by another brute of a man as we speed back to the terminal. He is silent and I read in him only boredom. We drive by the terminal and through a maze of other buildings.

"Where are we going exactly?"

"Just routine, sir. Nothing to worry about."

He doesn't actually know, doesn't care if I am worried, so long as I remain docile. I feel him assessing me, his instinct reading the tone of

my voice, my body language. I worry him a little. I am sitting too upright, too confident, not submissive enough to pass as your usual Joe Public snatched from the street. I had not realised the effect of attunement on my outer bearing, and sink a little more submissively into my seat, adopt a meeker tone. The man relaxes. Then he receives a message through his earpiece that momentarily irritates him. We are being directed away from the airport to somewhere in the city. I share his irritation. All I want is a moment alone, then I can step discretely inside and wait for Sunita to do the same.

We are on an industrial unit to the North of Manchester now, a vast complex of offices and warehousing, all pretty much the same. We draw up outside one of them. The car Sunita was taken in is not here. I am escorted through a series of glass doors, each requiring card access, and delivered into the bowels of some kind of operations centre. It is all grey walls and more glass, and a uniform blue carpeting. I see people at work, plain clothed, tapping at computers. It might have been an office for a bank or a supermarket for all one can tell, the psychic landscape being a similar mix of industry, frustration and a constant background hum of that most archetypal of all human mental patterns: abject boredom.

I realise there are probably buildings like this scattered throughout the country, indeed throughout the world, intelligence gathering – not so much these days against the machinations of dastardly foreign powers, but against the ordinary idiot let loose in a public place with a machete or a Kalashnikov. But resources are limited, money is hard won; they must prioritise, they must economise. In short, they must risk assess.

A plain room now, a table with two chairs, monitors on the wall, a camera – it's a video conferencing suite with bullet proof walls. The brute of a man stands by the wall, hands crossed over his vulnerabilities – though I suspect these also be made of iron. I amuse myself by dissolving the pin that holds his watch strap. The watch is a heavy, multi-dialled affair, and falls to the ground with a satisfyingly solid clunk. He is picking it up when the woman walks in.

She is Detective Inspector Miranda McWhillans, Mandy to her peers, when off duty, but strictly Ma'am at all other times. She is a cream silk blouse, a suit of funereal grey, a skirt cut above the knee, dark hair, ivory skin. There is an air of stillness about her, but inside I detect a fraying of nerves. If I listen closely with my mind I can feel her heartbeat; it is thin and rapid, like a frightened rabbit. This is

unexpected, the counterpoint somewhat endearing.

She holds my passport among the papers against her bosom. She does not smile. "Sit down," she says.

She is curt, business like.

I sit, she sits facing me, apparently relaxed and backwardly reclining, but from what I have felt in her I know this is an act, her casual indifference to me a tool rather than the truth of her. As for the bruiser, he is embarrassed she found him bending for his watch. He feels a keen desire for her, and what man wouldn't? Interesting! It would probably please him to know the desire is mutual at least of a passing fashion. And, yes, it's interesting to observe this. I assume Sunita must feel desire for me, but she guards it closely – perhaps for my safety. Even last night, I recall, in the midst of sexual practises the likes of which I had never imagined, she kept her feelings close.

"Thank you for your patience, Derek," she says. "You don't mind if I call you Derek?"

She does not wait for my compliance but presses on. "You do not know the man who died, nor how he came to be sitting between you and your partner. You do not know *how* he died." These are not questions; she states them all merely as fact, as if reading them from a tick sheet.

"Yes, that's right. Exactly as you said."

"Strange that you should have chosen your seats that way. To sit apart, with a seat between." She pauses a moment for emphasis, then says again. "Strange, Derek."

She has not asked a question and I know she is merely drawing me out into the silence, so I venture to oblige. "Yes. The seats were inconvenient. We didn't book them ourselves. I'm guessing the old man had a heart attack or something. Is that right? There was quite a loud bang before the plane stopped."

But Detective Inspector Miranda McWhillans is not interested in my speculation. It is strangeness that concerns her, strangeness that points to risk.

"Who booked the seats for you?"

I don't know what to say.

Saul booked them.

Who is Saul?

Distract her perhaps? "Can you tell me if Sunita is all right?"

"The sooner you answer my questions, the sooner you can ask her yourself, Derek."

But this woman does not know Sunita. Sunita has been taken to another location, and Sunita must be blocking because I cannot feel her. But why would she be blocking? Has she been able to step inside already then? Is she watching me sweat and struggle once more from the comfort of her resting place? Is that why I cannot feel her?

Very funny Sunita! Send me the story you have told them, then mine can match it.

"You do know where Sunita has been taken?" I ask.

No. I detect she does not know where Sunita has been taken, not exactly. Sunita's risk assessment has been subcontracted to another department, another team, on the other side of the city. As for the Inspector here, she has a bomb plot to foil, and a suspicious cargo to intercept in the Mersey. All these things occupy her more than I do, me whose appearance on her radar she could gladly do without.

She spreads some photographs on the table. They are of the train wreck, captured by mobile phone in all their grainy imperfection. Yet I am there, and recognisable, helping people from the wreckage, Sunita too.

"You get around, Derek."

Yes, computers are marvellous things, encapsulating all that is ingenious in man. They can recognise faces in pictures, cross reference them with other pictures, detect likenesses from the pool of all the images from all the cameras in all the world. Thus the authorities know the Sunita and Derek who boarded the plane on which a man died are likely the same who rode the train that crashed. And once you appear on the radar that way, the more the machine will

scrutinise its global inputs for your likeness.

Yet for all of that the authorities, in the person of Detective Inspector Miranda "Mandy" McWhillans, seek only to understand the connection, if there is one, beyond the stark coincidence of our being at the scene of one disaster, then popping up in another.

"And again," she continues. "the American authorities have you leaving Los Angeles on a flight to Sidney, but with no corresponding record of you entering their country. Nor have we any record of you leaving ours."

"Em... yes I can see how that might puzzle you."

I detect something else in her now, something scattered, disorganised, thinly stretched. She has not followed up the earlier question about our seat allocation, yet is hopping already onto something else. There is trouble at home I think, a cheating husband, a vexatious child at university whom she suspects is experimenting with drugs. All of these things challenge her stillness. Perhaps if Saul had some of that to deal with he would not be so bored.

"What also puzzles us is this man, Derek." She slides a picture of Saul across to me. Again it's taken from the train wreck. "And again here."

I'm puzzled. "When was this other one taken?"

But she does not like to be questioned. I feel her impatience like a stab in the gut. She has lots to do and not enough time or resources to do any of it. And she is wasting time with me.

"You know this man?" she asks.

"I know him as Saul."

Was that too much? But I must give a little to receive a little. And does it make any difference what I say? If you're listening Sunita, and you can get in touch, please help me or I'm going to make a fool of myself.

"He was also at the airport this morning," she says. "The three of you bring bad luck, Derek. Who is he?"

"I really don't know."

So he was at the airport. *Where?* Observation deck at the terminal, among the plane spotters and the relatives waving goodbye. He was watching the flight depart. Perhaps he even saw me at the window of the plane through binoculars.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Far from it. Saul's a... a very dangerous man. We'd all do better to avoid him if we can." Meanwhile I'm thinking to hell with the Highlands. It's not quiet enough, not far enough away. I shall persuade Sunita to decamp to a much remoter part of the world.

"It's also intriguing that until recently you were living the life of an unemployed pauper, Derek. And then, just like that, there's a million pounds in your bank account. Where did that come from?"

They can pull my bank records so quickly? And without even arresting me?

"I won the lottery."

"And you expect us to believe this?"

For all of her problems and inner turmoil, she maintains a level tone, composed, poised. I find it attractive, compelling, but her argument is weak.

"The lottery win is a matter of record,"I tell her. "And it's one of the less outrageous facts of my existence these days. Indeed there is much I could tell you that you will not believe."

"So why not try me, Derek? Tell me anyway, then I can decide for myself."

But all of this is pointless. I wonder, since I am not under arrest, if I might be allowed to visit the toilet. A toilet cubicle is the only place I can step inside myself without anyone seeing me do it. I am about to try my luck when the door opens.

She looks up, feels a flicker of annoyance as a man backs into the room. He's carrying a tray of cups. This is in contradiction of her orders and, I gather, a serious breach of security. I smell coffee, and I feel what is becoming by now a familiar disturbance in the psychic

landscape.

The brute of a man slides down the wall to land a lifeless sack upon the floor. I can no longer feel him, and know by now what that means. The man with the tray turns.

It's Saul.

"Sorry about that, Derek but he's armed and he might have shot me."

I'm on my feet, between him and the Inspector. "She's unarmed. There's no need to hurt her."

Saul is not listening.

Miranda is propelled backwards from the chair as if flung by an unseen blast, and finds herself against the far wall, physically pinned to it by a spike through her shoulder. Her teeth are clenched against the pain and she is barely sensible with the shock of it. I want to help her but dare not lower my defences, or Saul will be in and walking all over me.

There's a shower of sparks as he fuses the lock on the door, and another as he blows the camera. "That's better. Bit more private don't you think? Whole room's bullet-proof, soundproof. Amazing. Just like the other place. Take them ages to get in. Plenty of time to chat and then us both duck out, eh? Not a bad morning's work, all told. Care to sit down?"

"What place?"

"The place they were holding Sunita, of course. Walked right in, just like I walked into here. And there she was, and you know what she did? She was so pleased to see me, she put her hand on my arm. Invited me back to her place – know what I mean? How sweet!" He's nodding as I follow his logic. "That's right Derek. Conundrum for you there. If she took me to her place, then how come I'm standing here? Well, obviously we didn't go to her place, did we? It was too obvious, mate. If Sunita wasn't such a catch, I'd almost be disappointed in her. I took her to my place instead, and that's where she is now. And that's where she'll stay, until she's bored enough to submit to me."

"She'll never give herself to you, Saul. And you can't make her. She'll die first. You don't know her."

"Boredom has a way of deadening your senses, Derek. It makes you go against your nature. I'm a patient man. And she'll be worth it."

"So, why risk life and limb just to come tell me this? We are still mortal, Saul. A bullet in the brain is still a bullet in the brain, even for the likes of us."

"I did it for the thrill, Derek, and of course to gloat. I did it to see your face, when I told you. And it was very satisfying, thank you. I promise to take care of her, in every way imaginable. Of course I don't expect you to take this lying down – which is more than can be said for Sunita of course. Indeed I expect you to try to rescue her, but there's no need to trouble yourself. As you know, it's impossible anyway. But I'll tell you what: I'll let you have her back when I'm done, just to see your face again, and then I'll kill you both, because I imagine I'll be pretty bored with the pair of you by then. In the mean time I shall amuse myself by doing about the only thing I can do to her - I mean in my inner place. Can you guess what that is?"

No, I can't guess, but he seems to be inadvertently telling me he cannot physically harm her, which is the important thing, and the only thing I want to hear. Perhaps he's assuming I already know this. So what can he do? Materialise things? Dematerialise?

"That's right," he says. He gives me a knowing wink. "I'll dematerialise what she's wearing. One piece at a time, maybe one thread at a time. Linger over it, you know?"

"And I'm supposed to feel what, Saul? Outrage? Do you think it hurts me? You don't know us very well at all do you. Like as not Sunita will strip herself bare just to deny you the satisfaction."

"Oh, you can talk as big as you like, Derek. But I know what she means to you. As for her, it ought to wipe that superior expression off her face."

He looks once more to Miranda, allows me to read him, that he thinks the cleanest thing is to dispatch her.

"No, Saul, don't hurt her any more."

"Bit messy though don't you think, leaving her there? After all how are you going to get out without her seeing you vanish?" He ponders it for a moment, then shrugs. "Nah, she's gotta go, mate. You're not thinking

straight. Sunita would tell you the same. We can't go around making a show of ourselves."

Says Saul who has just brazenly walked into two secure operations centres creating such a show it'll have the authorities puzzling over it for years.

Suddenly I'm overcome by anger. He has Sunita trapped inside of him, he's killed and wounded and maimed and sees no wrong in any of it. He feels nothing. So I hit him, a satisfyingly strong punch to the jaw. He feels that. It surprises him, surprises me too, and he staggers back, shaking his head as if he had not considered the possibility he might be vulnerable to something so banal as a physical punch.

It also buys me time, enough time to reach Miranda. I don't even know if this is possible, but I lay my hand upon her arm. She is barely conscious, and it may be too late; Saul may already have sent an icicle into her brain.

I close my eyes and we drop.

Sunita will despair, but I could not let this woman die. My compassion was always my undoing. As for Sunita, for all of Saul's sinister bluster, I know he cannot physically harm her in a place that is non-physical. It does not alter the fact however that she's trapped and without the key to his resting place, to the inside of his head, no one else can get in, and she cannot get out. She's stuck in an environment of his own making, and shortly to be wearing nothing but her own skin while his lecherous eyes feast themselves upon her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I note my inner space is much bigger now. Indeed I cannot see the end of it, and it feels like an alien place, only adding to my sense of disorientation and loss. I cannot feel Sunita, yet she once told me we could read each other even from the inside. Is it that she is now inside Saul, and he does not permit it? Or she blocking from me the awfulness and the humiliation of her incarceration?

My former structures have all withered to dust, leaving only the grass growing ever taller, among the random undulations of the land. It reminds me that although I have made progress, I am not yet fully attuned, that without Sunita's presence, I will weaken. Yet if I am to succeed in this I must become stronger than ever. This seems unlikely but what am I to do? Am I to merely capitulate and accept that Saul has won.

He has his prize, but cannot touch her. So, he holds her instead, imprisoned like a bird of paradise in a gilded cage, a cage to which there is no key. Perhaps I could negotiate with him, but can think of nothing I might give him that he'd want more than the undressing and the eventual conquest of Sunita

For now though, my problems are more immediate.

Miranda isn't sufficiently conscious to make sense of anything yet, and I know that no matter how I play this, she's going to have difficulty with what she discovers when she does come around. She lays in the grass, my arms supporting her, as they did in the operations centre. The spike in her shoulder looks ugly and her wound has had ample time to bleed copiously into her blouse. I dissolve it at once, but this seems to bring her only greater pain and bleeding. I can feel it in her, feel it whiting out her thoughts.

The pain fades a little under my touch and responds more to the gentle massaging of my will, the outraged tissues of her body rejecting the invading pathogens of infection and slowly finding their way back into a more functional harmony. The flow of blood too, abates. As for brain damage from that hypothetical icicle, only time will tell.

But for now the main problem is: what the hell am I going to do with her?

“Miranda, can you hear me? Look at me. Do you know who I am?”

Her eyes focus slowly and she nods, but feels pain at the effort. I was too slow in dissolving the spike, but the priority at the time was to get her out of that room, get her away from Saul.

“This is all going to seem strange to you. Best not to ask too many questions for now.”

She tries to sit up but can't, faints as the pain becomes flame tipped. She comes around once more, her face, her body oozing sweat.

She remembers something: “Saul!”

“Saul can’t get to us here. We’re safe. Completely safe.”

She takes a ragged breath, sits, then with a monumental effort of will, pushes herself to her knees. I try to help, but she presses me away. She's fearful, confused. Then she tries to run, breaks a heel, kicks off her shoes and runs some more, but the space is featureless and she doesn't know which way to turn. Her pain is less now but I feel a rising nausea and giddiness, and a paralysing fear... fear of this place, also of me and my intentions.

It’s best I let her go for a while.

As I wait for her to calm down, I build a small cabin, fashion it on one I holidayed in as a child, a place I felt was the most perfect on earth. I do this in a daze, manifesting walls, furnishings, windows, doors, all from memory, and marvelling that none of it seems remarkable to me any more, I mean that I can do this. I fashion a book lined study, a comfortable bedroom with soft fabrics for Miranda to rest in, and I install a wood burning stove to crackle and comfort us both. Then I fashion trees and bluebells to surround it. The creative aspect and the opportunities afforded in the inner space are one of the great pleasures of attunement.

It also helps me to think.

Close at hand is the wall and the gate. It runs off in two directions, but the further bounds are lost in the uncertainties of my own mind, faded to a haze. I have already tried the key to Sunita’s place in the lock, but it does not yield and I have concluded one cannot enter the mind of

another, if that other is already in the mind of someone else.

Saul.

Eventually, I find Miranda a little way off. She is curled up, on her side in a foetal position, trembling. It's a troubling thing, this knowledge of another's terror, worse even than knowledge of their physical pain. She is also strangely preoccupied by the fact she has lost her shoes. Her fear increases as I approach, fears my apparent power, and once more that I might hurt her. And she is still in pain, nursing her arm across her belly, but at least it seems Saul did not have time to damage her brain.

I venture to lay a comforting arm on her shoulder, but she shrugs it off. "It'll ease gradually, the pain. I'm really sorry for this, Miranda. But I could think of no other way. He was going to kill you." I manifest a pair of shoes for her and lay them by her side.

"I'm sorry, they're hardly fashionable, but they should be comfortable."

Doubts now. She's conflicted, wondering if I am perhaps to be trusted after all.

"Best to think of it as a bad dream perhaps, that you will wake up soon. And you will, I promise."

The trouble is I can't say for sure yet where exactly that will be – where she will wake up, I mean.

Then something kicks in, her training perhaps; she pulls it across her mind like a mask, and suddenly I'm reading strategies for dealing with a kidnap situation: *ascertain demands, set up a rapport, show a non threatening confidence, do not beg for mercy.* She is remembering the details of Saul's dramatic entrance, assumes he and I are in this together, that it is Sunita's release from custody we want, that we have kidnapped Miranda for the purposes of exchange. We are members of some strange and as yet unidentified anarchist cell. *How did she miss this? How did she miss us in her risk assessments of all that might do harm to the world?*

I must distract her from this or there'll be no making sense of anything.

I pluck a stalk of grass, hold it up between us and shape-shift it into a rose. This confuses her, gives her pause, has her doubting her sanity,

her belief that she is actually awake. I twirl the rose between my fingers, and it becomes a tulip, then a daffodil.

Why is he doing this, she's wondering. It slows her thoughts down for me, makes them easier to read. She thinks of escape, of going home, except this thought is followed by a feeling of loneliness, of emptiness, of desolation. I've felt this before in humans, know it through my own remaining part-humanness. We need to be loved, and it hurts when we feel we are not.

"I can't deliver you back to the operations centre," I tell her. "That might be dangerous for me. It will have to be to somewhere else. Not in the UK either. It's probably too hot for me there right now. You'll need a passport, then. Here, this one will do. And some money. Take this credit card. The pin number's whatever you first think of, okay? No limit to the money you can draw. Confusing I know, but just go with it."

She takes the passport I have just manifested. It's not perfect, but it will get her home. And the card. These things make her feel more secure, as well they should, being the keys to the material kingdom, but she is also curious, also wondering if forensic analysis of these things will yield clues to my identity, my origins, my beliefs, my paymasters.

"You'll never fathom me, Miranda. Never fathom Saul or Sunita. We are not part of the games you people play. We have no interest in them. Saul is a threat, yes. Bigger than you can imagine. Sunita and I, though... we mean no harm."

I experience a wave of regret at the sound of Sunita's name. Will I ever see her again? What will Saul do to her? What else can he do but make the space as featureless as possible? Only long months of sensory deprivation would have her begging him to take her back to a more material reality, and he has already told me what his price would be for such a thing.

Might she be tempted though, on the off chance she could gain the upper hand?

This isn't helping.

I draw my thoughts to a close, return my attention to Miranda. "I've built a cabin a little way from here. It's comfortable. The surroundings are more conventional, not so... bleak and open as this. You can rest there, or you can stay here, curled up in the grass, it's up to you. Either

way, no harm will come to you. When I feel no more pain in you, and I'm sure that you are well, I'll take you home."

"Home?"

"Well, not exactly home, but certainly to a more familiar reality. How about Paris?"

"Paris?"

For a moment she's thinking she can alert the authorities there. But her phone didn't come through with her. It's still on the table in the interview room.

I offer her mine.

"I've never tried to call from here," I tell her, "but I suspect you'll find there's no signal."

She begins to catch on.

"Yes, I'm reading you, Miranda. Listen, you can go on assuming the worst in me. It's up to you and makes no difference in the end. But it would make things a lot more pleasant if you could think I actually intend you no harm, and that the only reason you're here is Saul would have killed you if I'd left you behind."

But where is here, she's thinking.

"It's nowhere. You'll never fathom it. Don't waste your time trying."

Now she's thinking of the brute of a man, the man who desired her this morning, and whom she desired back, at least for a passing moment in the pangs of her loneliness. It was an irrational thing, born of her husband's cheating. *My how her thoughts do flitter!*

"Yes, he's dead I'm afraid. I'm not sure how Saul did it. Same way he killed the poor old guy on the plane, I suppose. I felt his light go out. Same way he would have killed you."

I manifest a cube of ice in my palm. It begins to melt and dribble. "In the brain, we think, or the heart. It's only water after all, and difficult to trace, difficult to ascertain the cause, afterwards. And no, I would never think of killing. Never threaten you, or anyone... except Saul. And

regarding the latter odd flicker of thought, Mandy, while you are indeed a very beautiful woman, Saul is right in at least this one respect: after a while they no longer do it for you – women I mean. Only Sunita excites me. And now I think I've lost her. Saul has her, you see?" I give her a smile. "You can't block your thoughts from me. The only way to keep them private is for me to stop reading you. To allow you your privacy."

She uncurls herself at last, sits more upright, tests her arm. "Then please do so. Please stop... reading me."

I nod. "Granted. Listen, I am trying to protect you."

“I believe you. Thank you.”

I steal one last peek inside of her. She’s bewildered at the thought of returning. "What am I going to say? What am I going to tell them? They'll think I've lost my mind."

"I know, tricky isn't it? We’ll think of something. Easiest thing I suppose is for you to be found wandering the streets somewhere, splattered in blood as you are now and feigning amnesia. Flimsy I know, but plausible if you can keep it up. You'd be expected to sound crazy for a while."

We make our way back to the cabin, she is unsteady on her feet and still very weak. I slip my arm around her waist and she leans into me for support. I feel the trust in her like warm wave. I am about to ask her if she is hungry. She replies she is not, that she is however very thirsty.

But I had not yet asked her anything.

"How about a cup of tea then?"

She nods and I wonder.

"I'm sorry you got mixed up in this," I tell her. "You’re an important person. You have important work to do in keeping the world safe, and now we've messed all that up. Saul and his games. Sunita and I would prefer to live quietly."

"It doesn’t matter,” she says. “I’m just one more copper, one more finger in the dam. I've been a police officer for twenty years, Derek. There is no end to the troubles of the world. Put your hands in a bucket

of water, then take them out and the hole that's left is a measure of how much I'll be missed."

"You sound like Sunita."

"Who is she, Sunita?"

"You're asking professionally?"

"Always."

"She's like nobody you've ever met. I can assure you of that. But there is a price for knowing her, for being *with* her. And the price is what you see when you look at me. Listen, we'll try to rid the world of Saul for you, but there are no guarantees, and after that, my dear Miranda, Sunita and I are most likely outta here."

We come to the cabin, and I sense something falling away from her. She steps from it and comes up renewed, as if stepping from a chrysalis into a new skin. She is oiled and smooth now, and calm. It's a good sign, I think. I detect no malice in her, but only a somewhat tarnished desire to do good, to do her duty.

I suggest she sleeps a while.

Two men are dead and a senior investigating officer is missing, amid a scene of carnage and chaos the authorities will be picking over for months in vain. And I am implicated at its very centre. It will be difficult for any of us involved to set foot back in the world again and explain ourselves. If there is a radar, metaphorical or not, all three of us are now on it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I wait until she is sleeping before withdrawing to another room and inviting Miss Pringle's counsel. I'm not sure how to go about this, and to be sure it feels wrong – I mean actually summoning the presence of a woman I spent most of my more tender years being summoned by. But she does not seem to mind and is soon tapping at the window, conventionally enough.

I let her in.

"Less dramatic, Derek," she explains.

"Than what?"

"Than simply appearing in the middle of your living room like the Genie with three wishes. It's always best to keep up the appearance of things, even if those appearances are never what they seem on the surface."

"Ah, but if only you could grant me those three wishes, Miss Pringle. I know what the first one would be."

She sighs, then settles down by the woodburner. "I know. And the second wish?"

"Having restored Sunita to safety, then wind the clock back and never get on that damned train to Edinburgh."

"And the third?"

"Have Sunita and I made ordinary again."

"Oh, dear. I'm glad you called me. Things aren't going at all well for us, are they?"

"I fare much worse than the last time we spoke. You were right, my head is too muddled. I need to know everything I know, Miss Pringle, as well as a good deal of what I don't, and I need to be sharp about it. But what are the chances of that?"

She thinks about this. "Well, on the up side you appear to be making

significant strides towards attunement. The last time I was here your constructions were very flimsy indeed, dear, if you don't mind my saying. But this is lovely. Very accomplished."

"Thank you."

She turns to the bookshelf, takes down the Principles of Being and settles it in her lap. Then she sits motionless for a while, looking at me. I was hoping she'd flip directly to the page in question, the page that would reveal the quirk, the chink in the curtain that would get me into Saul's head.

But...

"I don't know it do I?"

"I'm afraid not, dear. As a principle, it's a solid one, the sanctity of the inner space. No one gets in or out without invitation by person, or by proxy of the key. There are no exceptions."

"I was afraid of that."

"But this is only what you know, Derek. These are the facts, the axioms of existence, so to speak. But there is an incompleteness in them, always. If you want to progress to new knowledge, to harvest fresh facts from the unknown, you need another approach."

"And what approach might that be?"

"We cannot derive the meaning of life, from Newton's laws of motion. There are limits to the analytical method, to logic. There are always gaps that must be bridged for new connections to be formed."

"Bridged? How?"

"By intuition, Derek. By opening the mind, and inviting the solution." She tosses the principles aside. "These are of no use to us here."

"Intuition?"

She nods. "But it is the whim of the gods if this be granted."

"Why can't I feel Sunita, Miss Pringle?"

"Either Saul won't allow it, or she is blocking you. You know this."

"But she might be able to feel me, like before, when she was inside?"

"It's a possibility. I admit we're not certain on this point, but we should not rule it out."

"And one-way communication is better than none."

"It depends on what is being communicated."

"The knowledge that she is not forgotten, that I am trying to find my way back to her."

"But who does this comfort the most? Is it her, or yourself?"

"Assuage my guilt, you mean?"

"This is not your fault, Derek."

"Yes it is. It was me who made her go after Saul."

"No, it was Sunita who made Sunita go after Saul."

"Then I must go back into the world as soon as I can, and hope she knows what I'm thinking, and that what I'm thinking gives her hope."

"And what are you thinking?"

"I need the key to Saul's head, Miss Pringle."

"But this is a thing he must fashion for you, Derek. And give to you. And forgive me, dear, but such a thing seems highly unlikely."

"That would be to agree with what I think I know. However..." I take the chain from round my neck. On it hangs the key Sunita gave me, and that of her father's. "These keys are symbolic, aren't they? They're not like ordinary keys. The shape of them doesn't matter. The imprint of the key that turns the lock is in the mind that formed it."

"An interesting theory, and possibly an intuitive leap. But Saul must still provide the imprint and how are we to get it?"

"That, Miss Pringle, is among the facts I admit I do not know. But it's

the start of something, and there's a feeling inside of me now that there is a way. If only Saul has not thought of it too, I might even turn the tables on him! Though I admit my last attempt to do that didn't end well."

She smiles, motions with her eyes in the direction Miranda is sleeping. "Don't forget," she says. "You must also take care of your guest. Sunita is not your only problem now."

"I'm aware of that. Miranda's a strange one. You know, she could almost be,..."

"Oh, yes... there was a definite tingle there."

"You felt that too?"

"Absolutely, dear."

"What am I missing here, Miss Pringle?

"Well it's obvious: she's capable of attunement, and I don't think she really wants to go home."

It's true, I have the feeling I've rescued her from much more than Saul. And that may be a problem for the future, but for now…

I have to find a way of inserting her back into reality.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I enter quietly and sit by the bed while she sleeps. There, I read her dreams for a while. They are frightful things, their images captured not from the events of today, but from past adventures, tragedies, disasters, and a general proximity to all the insanity and stupidity, and filth of the world. And lost amid this oceanic torment, Miranda drowns, her hands clutching for grip at greased ropes dangled teasingly by ghoulish figures – a husband and a daughter – who laugh at her efforts to stay afloat. And as she strains for purchase, the ropes are snatched away.

This is a brave woman. She deserves better, deserves her dignity.

She senses my presence and stirs.

"Sorry to wake you, Miranda."

She's sleepy still, a sweet healing sleep, and I sense no pain in her now.

"I heard voices," she says.

"Only me, talking to myself. We're alone. Listen, I promised you a cup of tea and I quite forgot."

She nods, reads something in me. It's a little blurry, but she understands well enough the time has come for me to take her back. I feel at once a resistance in her.

"Oh, not yet," she says. "Please let me stay a little longer."

"I'm not sure it's wise, or even good for you to be near me at all."

"Not good for me?"

"I think you're capable of... attunement. I know you don't know what that means, so let me explain; it means the longer you're around someone like me, the stranger things will get for you. We must go back."

I reach gently for her hand, so as not to alarm her, reading her all the

while for fear. There is none. No fear at least of me, but still an almost visceral reluctance.

She shrinks away... "No, not yet, please."

"We must. Close your eyes."

I lay the tea at her bedside, take mine to the window and look down. She stirs from sleep once more, sits up, realises her sudden state of undress and pulls the covers about her more demurely.

"Sorry about that," I tell her. "This seems to be the way it works. There'll be clothes in the wardrobe. I took a guess at your size. Your passport and credit card are on the table. You can make you way home easily from here."

"Where are we?"

"Paris. I promised you Paris. Sunita and I once stayed here. Slept in this very room, actually. Oh, it seems a lifetime ago now."

I turn to her. Sense the vulnerability in her, the dawn of a new fear now we have returned. It's ill formed as yet, but part-born from her dreams, and then there's a flicker of something when she looks at me. What is that again? Desire? It's really quite thrilling for a man to feel it as the woman feels it. Interesting too, how she wrestles with it, suppresses it, returns to embarrassment – but for a moment there I was definitely *in*. Or I would have been, had I wanted it, and we could have stretched the moment out a little longer.

She blushes. She can read me.

Humans are strange.

I ask her: "Have you worked out what you will say?"

She shakes her head, looks sad. "Amnesia, like you said. Weak, yes, but nothing else will cover it. I remember nothing."

"I'm sorry for all of this. Truly."

"Don't be. You saved my life. I owe you that at least."

"There is another option, of course."

She reads me again. "Disappear? Fresh start? Don't tempt me." She smiles, but there is a sadness in it.

"You could do it," I tell her. "I feel the resourcefulness in you."

She's thinking of her daughter, that she cannot abandon her. But daughters lost to drugs are daughters lost to a demonic possession. They are no longer who we thought they were, and we might never get them back. All we have is the demon, and they are impossible to love, to nurture. She reads this in me too, tests herself for a reaction, finds herself in agreement. She knows well enough the wasteland of lives lost to drugs. A mortal mother could make no difference to any of that, even though she must try unto death of one or the other.

This is her sorrow. And the reason she must go back.

"Will I ever see you again?" she asks.

"Can I take the risk you won't call the cops on me if you do?"

"From what I've seen the cops don't worry you much."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Cops play rough these days. Our kind don't always make it into custody."

"Our kind?"

"You know? Non specific but severe threats to national security."

"You shouldn't believe everything you read on the Internet you know?"

"I know. But I'm reading it in you."

"You weren't on that list, Derek. You were just a person of interest."

"Well, if there is a list I'm on it now."

But we were talking about her.

There is another option, of course. If Sunita can hear my thoughts now, she will be closing her eyes in despair at my foolishness. But something is happening to this woman. A vibration. A tingle of awareness. Is this what Sunita felt in me, once? Maybe... maybe it's a

possibility, were I ever to become fully attuned, that I might find others to awaken, like her. Perhaps this is what people like us do... awaken others.

"Derek... you're right. They will try to find you. And Sunita. You will be among the world's most wanted now. Every system will be set up to look for you, every camera trying to recognise your features. And they will be ruthless."

"Yes, it's unfortunate of course. It makes it difficult to put down roots in any one place for a decent length of time. Difficult to form relationships with anyone who is not of our kind. And these days a change of papers isn't sufficient. We cannot alter our DNA, or change our faces so your cameras do not recognise us. It will be easier when we are all chipped at birth, then our kind might change identities by merely changing our number. As for me, don't worry, by the time you think you've found me, I've already gone."

"I couldn't live that kind of life."

"I know. But then not all of us do, Miranda. Listen, let's not say good bye. I don't know what's going to happen when I walk out of that door. But if you should ever find yourself in trouble, think of me, think of me very hard, and if I can, I will come."

She takes a breath, is afraid for me. "What you were saying, you're right. Not everyone makes it into custody these days. And they don't have to catch you, just pinpoint you on the map by whatever means. It's not well known but there's a network of machines – drones – they patrol the grid, drop laser guided bombs. There's been a spate of unexplained bombings up and down the country, blamed on terrorists, but they're our own doing. Suspects are graded. Risk assessed. Anyone scoring high enough these days is simply taken out."

The news is sobering, but not unexpected. "I'd better be careful then."

Another reason to leave the world behind: we have lost control of it, lost control of ourselves.

Leaving her is not easy. I have mixed up her life in ways I would have liked to put right by accompanying her back into the world. Instead I leave her naked in a hotel room, with a false passport and an untraceable credit card that will spit unlimited amounts of cash out of any ATM in the world. It seems hardly gentlemanly, but she's

experienced and resourceful and I know she'll be all right.

It's true of course. By now our permanent addresses in the world have been raided. Nothing has been found, but those places had become familiar and comforting abodes to us – my little cottage in the country, Sunita's flat out by the docks. Even my name I had grown used to, but it will have to change now. Did I tell it? I shall keep "Derek", but the rest is expendable. Yes, even the bank account with the million pounds in it will have to be given up, but it doesn't matter.

By the time I reach Gare Du Nord, I have created another account – no time to mess around with lottery wins this time. Ten thousand is sufficient, and less likely to appear on the radar of officialdom. It is self replenishing of course. And I award myself a salary of four thousand a month, which aught to cover most expenses. For convenience I pay myself from the bank's own coffers. It seems a sweet enough revenge upon a society that disowned me long ago.

I have a fresh passport and credit card, which I use to book my seat on the Eurostar to London, then again from London, north to Edinburgh and a journey I did not want to have to make ever again.

Especially not alone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Twelve hours on a train. Paris to the Kyle of Lochalsh, then a taxi ride and a long walk, collar turned against an angry wind and rain, to the still smouldering ruins of Sunita's cottage. The sky is grey, torn clouds running across a grey sea, all the colour bled from the world. How long since I last stood here with Sunita? A few days? How impermanent life is in the material world, how quickly everything can change, and a new reality present itself, whether we are ready for it or not!

The roof has gone, but the low walls remain. All internal studding has turned to ash. I try to differentiate what was once the kitchen from the bedroom and the living room. Proceeding carefully through the rubble I recognise the smashed remains of the cups Saul and I drank coffee from, and recognise from these further remains of the kitchen – bits of table that were not consumed, the steel legs of the chairs, stripped of paint, flame licked and already turning to rust. I examine these left-overs cautiously, turning over roof tiles, light fittings, until at last I find what I'm looking for.

I had feared it would not be there, and fasten on it now as my last hope, slim as it is. I reach down and lift it from the ruins, examine it for a moment, then drop it into a polythene bag to preserve it.

From this point on I must block my thoughts, even from Sunita. It has crossed my mind that Saul may be able to intercept them, since she is held in his domain. And if I want to surprise him this time I can take no risks. I hold the one thing in my hand, now, that might be his undoing, but it will still take much work and luck.

If you can hear me, Sunita, stay strong. Yield to him if it keeps you alive, but don't lose yourself, and don't despair. We have unfinished business, you and I. But first I must attend to Saul. And Saul, if you can hear me, know that I am not afraid of you, and that I am coming.

I look around now for interlopers, but this is one of the last remaining wildernesses, on the western fringe of Europe. There is no one to see me. No one to be surprised. I lower my lids and drop.

There is only one place left in the country to which I can safely jump now, and it just so happens it is also the one place I need to be.

I wake in a dusty attic room in Coventry, lie still for a moment and scan the psychic landscape. It's possible the police have made the link from Sunita to her father, but I detect nothing beyond the normal noise of human thought. Mr. Singh arrives at eight to open his shop, finds me in the kitchenette already making tea. He accepts the brew and we sit down.

He sighs. "I take it things did not go well?"

"No. Saul has her, now."

"Ah." He closes himself off carefully, does not allow me to read him at all. He changes the subject: "Have you had time to read the news?"

"No... I've been... busy."

"Then you should know the whole country is on alert, looking for you. All three of you. You are armed and dangerous. You are deadly."

It's irksome to be lumped in with Saul. For sure he is deadly, but it's a measure of the collective ignorance that none of us need to be armed for that. "Have the police been to see you yet?"

He shakes his head. "There is little in the public domain to link me with my daughter. So..." He sighs once more, sinks a little, reveals to me the weight in his heart. "Saul has her, you say."

"Yes."

"And he means to kill her?"

"Not yet."

"Then what does he want?"

I allow him to see far enough into my memory that he can be in no doubt, what it is Saul wants with his daughter. He lifts up his hands as if to heaven. "Then all is lost, Derek. There is nothing we can do. And Sunita has brought this on herself."

"I'm to blame, sir. But I think there is something we can do."

"If she is in his resting place, no one has access without the key."

“That’s why I need you to make that key for me.”

“I only that were possible. But I can make a key only to my own resting place.”

“Your skill at manifesting is like nothing else I’ve witnessed, sir. For sure, I feel you can do it.”

He laughs. “You think that watch was difficult? But Derek, it was easy. What you’re asking now... this is truly impossible. You disappoint me, you have understood nothing of what it means to be as we are! You are wasting your time. Better you should hide, go abroad, and hope they never find you.”

“What if you had this?”

He looks as I hand him what appears to be a rusty steel spike. He's puzzled. “This? What is this?”

“Saul tried to manifest this through my leg, pin me to a chair with it. I blocked him, the manifestation was ejected, fell to the floor. It was forgotten. That’s where I’ve been these last few days, recovering it.”

Mr Singh is nodding now, his eyes shining, if not quite in triumph then at least in interest as he follows the run of my thoughts.
“Saul manifested this?”

“Yes.”

He thinks for a while, holds the spike in his hand, feels its weight, hefts it from one hand to the other. “It will take time. Manipulating the work of others is not like manifesting one’s own work.”

“But you agree it’s worth a try?”

He nods. “Yes. I shall try. I need space, Derek. And quiet. And I need time. I am going to step inside for a while. I’ll call you when I have news.”

When we manifest things, we leave a trace of ourselves inside of them, the pattern of our thoughts, a fingerprint, if you like. It's just possible a man of Singh's unique crafting abilities can work with that. And the secret of the key is not in the shape of it, but in the thought patterns that gave it form. If Singh can make that key for me, Saul is in

for the surprise of his life.

And I might just be able to release Sunita from his grasp.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I have shaved my head, trimmed my eyelashes into a different shape and bleached them white. I have adopted spectacles, and have begun to grow a beard. It will not completely fool the cameras, but I imagine it will keep me a little lower down the list in their recognition algorithms, keep my likeness as a "possible hit", rather than a direct match. Still, I am twitchy every time I hear a police siren, though I do not suppose they'll come for me with sirens blazing. Miranda has already warned me a surgical drone strike is more likely. I am one of those who will likely never make it into custody.

I have been feeling the networks for such machines, and have detected at least their possibility. I can see how such a device, armed with laser guided bomblets or even an accurate gun would be a valuable aid to law enforcement, but dangerous also to innocent bystanders, and I trust we have not yet sunk so low they would be used indiscriminately. Which is why, I suppose I'm sitting more or less brazenly in a corner coffee shop, catching up with the news on my freshly manifested phone.

Yes, I can make them now.

The place is quiet, no more than half a dozen others. I wish there were more, fearing that so few might not constitute safety in numbers. Also, in case the drones are indeed capable of sniping, as I suspect they are, I have chosen a table well indoors, away from any window that lets on to a patch of sky.

The news says I am wanted for questioning in relation to the unexplained death of a man on a Frankfurt bound flight from Manchester, also a security guard and the suspected kidnapping of a police officer. How could it have come to this: from unemployed non-entity, to international pariah? Yes… another consequence of the price of being with Sunita.
I'm not sure where we go from here, always supposing I can get her back, and we can somehow untangle ourselves from Saul. If I cannot, then it's unlikely the world is big enough any more to hide even someone as skilled at disappearing as I have become.

I note no motive is given for my bizarre rise to notoriety, but Sunita's ethnicity is touted and blurred and used to suggest once more an

eastern link, and thereby proxy to the generic forces of fanaticism that would overthrow the west.

I wonder about Miranda.

If she has returned from Paris, been found wandering the streets suffering from amnesia, then the authorities are being very quiet about it. I wish I could have done more for her, taken longer to think things through. The damage to her body was easy enough to mend, but the damage to her life has been catastrophic. Even if she can convince her colleagues she has no memory of anything that happened to her, it will affect their confidence in the soundness of her psyche.

Police officers of Miranda's seniority often seek early retirement, and such a thing in her case may be forced upon her. Yet it was her job if anything that was the one sure footing she had in life.

On impulse I call up the room in Paris. She answers at once.

I'm unprepared for this.

"Why are you still there? What are you doing?"

"Thinking," she says.

"Miranda, they will find you and they will want to know why you are there. The sooner you show up wandering the streets with amnesia, the easier it will be for you."

"What about you. How are you?"

"Don't worry about me. I can disappear any time I like."

"You can't if you're dead. I'm remembering more of that incident in the control centre, what Saul said. You're still flesh, Derek. You can still die. If we don't get you, Saul will."

"Like I said, don't worry about me."

"Be careful calling me. They can track you. They don't need your mobile number, just your voice print. Where are you? Don't give me specifics, just the general picture."

"I'm back in England. Sitting in a cafe."

She reads my thoughts. "Don't think you'll be safer in a crowd. The machine has already calculated how many you're capable of killing. If the number of those sitting around you is less than that, the algorithm will deem it a price worth paying, and it'll be blamed on terrorism. One group or another may even be foolish enough to claim responsibility for it. It would hardly be the first time."

I have no reason to doubt her. I feel her sincerity, also her confusion at the moral ambiguity of her role as catcher of mass killers. "What times we live in, Miranda."

"I've been thinking. What you said about attunement. Is that possible for me?"

"I think so."

"I've been feeling things, hearing thoughts, sensing the moods of places. I realise I've even been reading your mind without knowing it."

"That's how it starts. We've been together long enough for you to experience those things. But they'll fade. Don't worry."

"I don't want them to fade."

"You said you couldn't live like I do. But that's what will happen if we go any further with this. Your whole world, your whole life will change."

"I'd have to be more discrete, certainly. But I could use these skills to make a real difference, Derek."

I realise I've had this conversation before, but it was the other way around.

"Once upon a time I felt as you do, but now I no longer see this as our place. If you're thinking you could use this thing to save the world, you're already on the wrong path. Suffering is immense, the needs of others will destroy you, hollow you out. We are not meant to save the human race from itself, Miranda. We are meant to transcend it. You need to accept that before you start on this path."

"Could you not do it?"

"Do what?"

"Bring me on. Help me reach attunement."

"No. I'm not fully attuned myself. And when I reach that stage I will also have reached my last days on earth. I must save Sunita if I can, or die trying. And afterwards... I don't know. Like I said, we will try to rid the world of Saul for you, but after that... we're gone."

"Is there no one else who might do it?"

This isn't right. She sounds too needy, too hungry for the transformation. Attunement might only corrupt her, turn her into another Saul.

"You might start out like I did, Miranda, wanting to mend every bit of hurt. You're thinking you could catch every criminal, foil every plot... but you would quickly tire of it. Indeed, you are already tired of it. I feel it in you like a deep weary ache."

"Only because I feel so powerless."

The phone bleeps with an incoming text. "I must go Miranda. Get out of Paris. Make your transition back into the world as best you can."

I cut the call, check the text. I had thought it might be from Singh, but it's from Miss Pringle. This confuses me because I have apparently sent myself a text.

It reads: "Get out".

This is merely the manifestation of a deeper intuition, you understand, and curious echo of my last words to Miranda. We all get these things from time to time, but are often blind to them, or we do not believe them. All right, getting them in text form is rather more literal than can be easily explained right now, but I trust Miss Pringle absolutely, only I don't quite understand what she's trying to tell me. "Get out?"

Ah.. sometimes we can spend so long reading the metaphorical, we lose sight of those occasions when a more literal interpretation will suffice. I can feel a presence now, something having sneaked in. It radiates energy – both in my perception of the local networks fields, and also the material. It's in the air, close, targeting. I feel it... targeting!

"Get out!"

I leave the café in a hurry, knocking over my chair – thinking not just to preserve myself, but to dissuade the authorities from taking such a utilitarian approach and wasting the innocent lives of those around me. I shout: "Fire, fire. Get out. Now!"

I scatter money on the table as I leave – an inappropriate gesture of honesty under the circumstances. People are looking up in alarm, some are already moving. I don't know how many make it out in time. I'm already outside and a hundred yards down the street, when the café front explodes and glass rains down.

Sirens wail, there are screams, a stunned moaning, and the psychic landscape is filled with crystal shards that shred my nerves. Under cover of the pall of smoke, I dematerialise, step inside, my ears still ringing.

Miss Pringle is waiting on the front step of my cabin, phone in hand and a pensive expression.

"For a minute there I thought we we'd had it," she says.

"My fault, I lingered too long on the 'phone. Miranda warned me to be careful."

It'll take a while for me to work through this one. For now all I know is I have saved my own skin, but possibly at the cost of so many others. They were aiming for me, cared nothing for those seated around me. I hope they made it out! But if the authorities were listening, if they targeted my voice print, they know I was talking to Miranda. My only hope is they did not have a print match for her voice – after all why would they – and that she had the sense to leave the hotel, or they will be coming for her too.

"Don't blame yourself," says Miss Pringle. "You didn't know they were capable of such a thing."

"I know it now. But what do we do? How do we live in a world like this?"

"Short of changing our skins and our DNA, it seems even current standards of deployed technology are capable of finding us, once we appear on the grid. And their first response will be to kill us. Mr Singh's

approach of leading an ordinary life, well below the radar. makes more sense now, does it not? We talk of transcending the human race altogether, Derek. Now might be just the time to do it."

"Or join them. Like Miranda said... just think how effective they could be..."

"Yes, she presents an almost convincing case..."

"Almost?"

"You've seen what they are capable of. Violence and death meted out on the basis of it perhaps sparing even greater violence and death at some future time. How soon then before people like you and Sunita are set aside in favour more ruthless men like Saul?"

I feel Singh calling me now, an image of him rearing foremost among my thoughts. "You're right," I tell her. "Listen, I must go."

She nods, squeezes me a smile. I close my eyes and drop.

It seems we are wise to avoid use of the phone, even those we have manifested ourselves, and even for which numbers do not exist. I shall ask Singh if he can produce a 'phone with a voice print modifier. For all of their dangers, to those wishing to stay off the grid of scrutiny, phones are still useful, and I would miss mine.

I wake in the dawn light of the apartment above the shop. Singh has correctly predicted my re-entry, and slides a teacup onto the night stand.

"Good morning, Derek."

"You have the key?"

He nods, shows me the key.

I don't know if this is good or not. We have a way into Saul's head; we should be pleased, but neither of us is smiling.

Later, Singh is watching the news on the TV, downstairs. The bulletins are full of yesterday's café bombing; streets are sealed – no one allowed anywhere near the scene while I presume evidence to support the bombing theory is provided, and all evidence to the contrary is

removed. The news bulletins do not say this of course, but it is a logical conclusion, given everything else I know. And wonder once again at my rise from economic non-entity, to public enemy number one.

What the reports do say is that four were killed and eight injured in the café, but I know this to be false for there were no more than six in the café at the time. As Miranda predicted, a middle eastern terrorist group has already claimed responsibility, thus sealing a mirage as fact.

"They fear you," he says. "People will always fear what they do not understand."

"I'd better go," I tell him.

"Yes," he replies. "I have been a long time building up this business. I do not want it losing in a puff of smoke. So be gone with you, Derek. But take care."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Stepping back inside, I find my space unaltered. The cabin is as I left it, also the trees and the little blooms I had fashioned. Miss Pringle is no longer here, having decamped, I presume to a place deeper inside my psyche. Inside the cabin is also as it was. This apparent stability is both pleasing and unsettling.

I pick up the discarded copy of the Principles of Being, flick idly through its pages. The text once more has the appearance of an alchemist's cookbook, strange diagrams and mostly illegible text – just the occasional sentence I can comprehend. It will be interesting to settle back some time and study it in depth, though I suppose all the book will tell me are those things I have already forgotten.

I set it back upon the shelf, smooth the covers on the bed where Miranda slept, and I spare a thought for her. There was still nothing among the news items about her being found and I'm wondering now if she has gone to ground, wondering about sending out feelers for her, for surely by now I would be able to find her. But I resist the temptation. I have done all I can for her. Anything else would be merely sentimental.

I remember my insatiable desire to use these powers to help others, and my reticence now seems one more milestone indicating just how far I've come since my earliest days with Sunita. That's another bit of the price I pay, that the longer I know her and think of her, the more I become like her. Except, that’s not quite true, is it?

I still think we can serve the good. But there are limits, and therein lies the challenge. Not to withdraw, but to recognise the limits and not mistake sentiment for compassion.

Through the window I spy the gate through which I shall shortly be leaving the confines of my own imagination, and entering Saul's. I wonder if I will ever see any of this again. But surely this need not be difficult? I am making more of it than I should; all I have to do is enter Saul's head, find Sunita, and lead her back to my resting place. He cannot stop us, and once the breach is made, he cannot then seal it up and trap us both inside of him. In short, what could possibly go wrong?

All right.

The key fits the lock perfectly, but this is to be expected. It's whether it turns that's the proof of Singh's success in so crafting it, and for a long while I hesitate, calming first my fear of Saul, and then of the unknown protective demons I might find inside of him. Well – they are hardly likely to be as benign as Miss Pringle are they!

Time now. Deep breath.

The lock clicks, the gate swings open, and I step through into a castle courtyard.

I am dazzled by it! The details, the scale. This is the work of years!

There are medieval knights everywhere, standing to attention like a vast guard of honour. They wear head to foot armour and it gleams like polished pewter.

At first I dare not breathe. Are they splinters of Saul's consciousness, like Miss Pringle is of mine? I remind myself they cannot harm me, though they are armed with many a gruesomely sharp-looking weapon. It is like a dream – we might encounter many a terrifying scene but we need pay it no heed unless we want to, or we are tricked into thinking it is an insurmountable barrier, when it is not.

For all of it's impressiveness and, like all our inner spaces, essentially this is nothing.

I clear my throat.

A guard turns in my direction, then they all do, like an array of robots, clanking and clattering. I stand my ground, call their bluff. Then comes a gust of wind, a pale dust blows up from the courtyard and things begin to shimmer out of focus. The guards evaporate one after the other, even as their collective surprise goes up like a moaned chorus. Then the walls of the castle begin to shimmer and shake.

This is even more impressive.

And unexpected.

My intrusion has caused a collapse of some sort.

And as the buildings melt there appears in the distance a lone table in the dust at which Saul sits with Sunita. She is finely dressed in a long black gown, he in white tuxedo. A waiter is pouring wine into Saul's glass before the waiter too disappears, leaving Saul surprised and gazing round for an explanation.

He freezes, mute when he sees me. It is the first time, I think, I have seen him look anything less than composed. It is a satisfying moment. I approach as casually as I can, unhurried, sauntering. Keep him guessing. He does not know I am afraid.

"Sorry," I tell him. "That castle must have taken ages to build. I didn't mean for it to vanish."

Sunita is looking at me now, and I'm feeling something very powerful coming from her, but it threatens to overwhelm me so I make a sign with my palm for her to close herself off a little. With a last flush and a tingle, she does so, but smiles her gratitude and her wonder.

It seems I have surprised both of them.

There is clearly also a venom in her for the hurt Saul has inflicted. She takes her glass and sloshes the contents in his direction. He catches it with his mind before it has crossed half the table, forms it into a perfect sphere of ruby wine, slows it, then catches it up in his hands, transforms it into a dove and releases it skyward.

"Temper," he says, and then: "Derek. You have the uppers on me, mate. You are standing uninvited inside my head. How is this even possible? Am I dreaming you?"

Sunita rises, dissolves her fine dress so she stands proudly nude for a moment. Then she manifests plain jeans and teeshirt, which she commences to pull on. Saul is looking at her with a kind of poignant longing. The dress was one he had materialised for her, and made her wear.

I feel it in him now, as I felt it once before, the base arousal, and then a sense of panic at her imminent going, but he also feels me listening and closes himself off. He can do nothing to stop her, and he knows we know this. And what he also tries to close off is a feeling of vulnerability which puzzles me because I can do nothing to him here; I cannot lay hands on him; I cannot play our game of psychic tag, and take him to a place from which there is no key for his return. I can only

do that from a material reality, and he's hardly likely to fall for such a trick again. In order for him to enter my space from here, he must venture voluntarily through the gate with me, and he isn't going to do that, so why his fear? What is his weakness?

"Don't look at me like that," he says, "I haven't touched her. You know I can't. Not here. Not unless she lets me."

"WhichI have not, " says Sunita, emphatically.

But what he has done, as he had promised to do, and I feel this in her most strongly now as a mixture of disgust and shame, is spend the time tormenting her, repeatedly dematerialising her clothing, at first to satisfy his prurient curiosity, and then to dress her as he wished, and strip her again. Sunita lets it be known she had grown weary of it, chose to comply with his choice of clothing, his dressing of her like one whore-princess after the other, stockings and suspenders and all. And in this, in my eyes, he has defiled her as surely as if he had been able to have his way with her physically.

So, what's he thinking to do now? Drop back into material reality, and then the whole game starts over again, but this time with the added spice of the authorities on all our backs, shooting at us from the skies with their drones?

The last of his constructs, the table, evaporates now, not because of my presence, but at his command, and what remains is a whiteness and a pale mistiness. He does this to deny us any point of reference. And still he taunts me. "She's quite a looker, Derek. Shall I undress her again for you?"

He means to brandish his only power over us, but already I feel something pathetic in him which serves to extinguish the flame of anger before it does any damage.

I'm still thinking of a suitably tart reply when he simply walks away.

Sunita comes to me then, takes my arm and wraps herself close. I feel it in her breath, the relief. "I thought I was trapped for ever," she says.

"So did I. But... you're... all right?"

"Not all right. But I'll mend."

"He keeps surprising us doesn't he?"

"And you keep surprising me, Derek."

I look about, trying to pick out forms in the swirling mistiness, but there's nothing, and no way of knowing how big the space is without feeling for every inch of it, and the mist is growing thicker. "We'll never find him in this."

"And we cannot control it," she says. "This is his resting place. And... he's turning out the lights. We should just go. Take me back to your place. Do it now before we lose our point of reference."

Sure enough as if the mists are not obscuring enough, it's also growing dark. I manifest a lantern. This seems to be permitted, but it illuminates only my own form, and Sunitas. She lets go of me for a moment, and disappears into the darkness, so grabs onto me once more in panic. She manifests a short length of rope, loops one end round my waist and the other around hers. This allows us some degree of independent movement while remaining linked by this flimsy psychic device, and visible to one another.

I try to reason with him, shouting out blind into the dark: "We don't want to hurt you, Saul."

The lights go back on and the mist thins until we spy him not far away. We are now in a panelled room, a room of many doors, the walls decorated with works of all the world's great masters. I see Leonardo, Michaelangelo, Titan…

"It's as well," he says. "Because you know you can't - not here. And you're too slow in the other place. So what are your intentions, Derek? Don't think I've not read them in her. We've been chatting of this and that. Oh, she's good. Layer upon layer of obfuscation, but I know what you've been thinking, that if you can get me into either of your resting places, you can leave me there to rot, or at least until my attunement is so feeble I can't even manifest my own shoe laces."

"Why prolong this, Saul?"

"For no other reason than I can, mate. I was also getting very bored until I bumped into you two. Keeping one step ahead of you's been easy, but also great fun."

"We have a key to the inside of your head. We can use it any time we want."

"Yes, inconvenient that, and I've still no idea how you managed it. But it's no use to you if you're dead, Derek. And the next time we meet out there, I will kill you, because now you have that key you leave me no choice. Then she'll want her revenge and I'll have no end of fun playing cat and mouse. Really, it'll do me the world of good. Whichever way things go from here, the pair of you have been a real tonic for my spirits."

"I'm not afraid of you Saul."

The room takes on a sharper focus. Sunita gives an impatient sigh. "We're wasting our time, Derek. Let's go." We move to one of the doors and open it. On the other side is a room very much like the first, again full of doors, Saul standing in the middle of it, and laughing now. He means to hide the gate, so we cannot return through it. And we cannot simply drop back into reality from here, without him.

"He's creating a Moibus loop," says Sunita. "Everything comes back to the same place. But don't worry, he can't maintain it for long. He's weakening by the second. He'll have to go back into the world for another thrill soon."

Saul sighs. "This is true. Sunita, you're a beautiful woman, and I love you, but you're rapidly becoming more trouble than you're worth."

"You thought the taking of me would be easy."

"The taking of you *was* easy. Also the stripping of you, and jolly nice too. It's the keeping of you that's proving more difficult." He relents. "Okay. Clearer now?"

The walls evaporate. We are standing on a closely mown lawn, the wall and the gate to our backs. "There," he says, then nods as if to say touché.

We're about to step through the gate when he says: "I will have that key, Derek."

"I think I'll hang onto it for a while longer. Maybe fashion some more, distribute them among our friends."

"I was afraid you were going to say that. So, how about this: How about a duel?"

"A what?"

"You know? An old fashioned duel, to the death of course. Let's meet tomorrow, in the same café where I first saw you together. We'll sit opposite each other and we'll stare at one another. First one to blink, gets a spike between the eyes." He laughs. "How about it?"

"I don't think so."

"Aw.. go on. I'll take you both on if you like – can't say fairer than that. Two against one."

Sunita sighs. "All right, but tomorrow is too soon. Thanks to you, Derek and I have no safe houses left to return to. We might have to wake back anywhere in the world from here, then travel, avoiding the authorities who by now will be looking for us. Make it the day after. And make it midnight, then we can be sure the café will be empty. Just us. No one else gets hurt. Yes?"

He shrugs, a little disappointed at her terms, but agrees. "Okay."

And then she says: "Saul, I want you to know that you have hurt me, that I have felt your intentions like something cold and slimy, dribbling over my skin. I do not tell you this in order to increase any gratification you might feel at the thought. I tell you because I would not want you thinking I could ever forgive you, and that I might be merciful the next time we meet.

"We will be there, midnight, day after tomorrow, but if you are wise you will not come. You will disappear, you will lie quietly, go to ground until your de-attunement sets in of its own accord, and returns you to an ordinary life. Otherwise, we will make it our life's work to hunt you down. And it will be us who will waste no time in killing you."

She leads me to the gate, and we step back into the safety of my resting place. For all of our bravado, my feeing is one of immense relief. We have escaped him! I lean on the gate, hear it click shut behind us, and feel safe once more, safe and complete in her presence.

"What now?" I ask.

"I don't know. But we'd better think of something, and quickly." She looks over to my cabin, and the array of pretty flowers that surrounds it. Then she turns back to me, an eyebrow arched in tart query. "So, tell me, exactly *who* is Miranda?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

We touch down in New York, same hotel, same room as last time. Sunita rises and bathes. She is a long time scrubbing him from her skin, a long time blocking her feelings from me until she can trust herself to be unemotional. Then she visits the salon, and has her hair cut shorter, styled with ringlets and died red. The contrast with her golden brown skin is startling, renders her unrecognisable, an effect she builds upon by adding gold jewelling to the side of her nose – all this to keep the facial recognition algorithms guessing. Finally, we manifest fresh passports under new names and we fly out of JFK, mid-morning, UK bound.

By late evening we are booking ourselves into another, more obscure hotel, much less well appointed. We have chosen Berwick, on the wild Northumberland coast. It's remote, but not so quiet we cannot hear Saul coming if we need to. There is a feeling of having gone to ground – at least in so far as that is possible in material reality – but we are also just an hour out of Edinburgh, a short run in by train. Tomorrow we shall ride it to our confrontation with Saul.

You're perhaps wondering why we're even taking Saul's challenge seriously. But why not? It will come to a showdown at some point, so better by mutual consent than this game of cat and mouse, and better sooner than later. Of course we're aware of his deviousness, but there is also a vanity about him, vanity enough to consider us an easy killing. It's just a pity it had to come to this. Our way was cleaner. Our way did not involve killing, but now I don't see how we can avoid it.

The day has left me exhausted and disorientated and I don't see how any amount of sleep is going to restore me sufficiently to last even a couple of seconds in his presence.

Something odd has happened during the journey. I have opened myself to Sunita, and she has combined her thoughts with mine, picking up on things I was thinking and building on them with her own knowledge, or discarding them, offering back her thoughts and modifying them from my unverbalised reactions – all of this while we sat side by side in apparent silence as we travelled by plane and train and taxi. It was not a complete opening on her part of course, but specific to the problem we face in dealing with Saul. It has however created in me a greater longing for that complete opening she has

been promising.

I also want to heal the hurt in her, for the humiliation she suffered. I try to send her my warmth, which she accepts with a smile and a laying of her hand upon mine. But it will take time to overcome this, and at the back of my mind always is the feeling it is my fault, a feeling she chides me for. As for Saul, for all of our thinking, we can come up with nothing that is an even vaguely plausible means of dealing with him, other than actually sitting down and staring him out. And not even Sunita is confident of the outcome under those circumstances.

It's an old hotel, Victorian-gothic, looking out across the North sea. The Maître D is a pleasantly jowly dame, tweed suited and stout hipped. Sometimes Sunita's ethnicity causes irrational tensions in the less cosmopolitan parts of the country, and we are casually braced for it now, but detect here only an air of welcome, and quiet repose. She does not recognise us from our appalling mugshots on the TV news, is grateful only for our money as business is slack.

As a hide-out, Berwick will do for now.

Checking in, Sunita pauses over the details of her invented name and address before writing them in the guest book, and suddenly she says to me: "I would not dismiss a relationship with Miranda out of hand, you know? I mean, if it's what you wanted."

"What do you mean, relationship?"

"You find her attractive?"

"She is physically attractive, yes, and has certain attractive vulnerabilities, but I do not *desire* her."

She shakes her head, a little nonplussed. "I would have no objection if you did, so long as you still saw at least some part of yourself spending time with me."

"Sunita, my mind is wide open to you, as usual, and as usual yours is closed to me. But while I have no clue what you're driving at with this, you at least should know I am telling the truth when I say *I do not desire her*."

She smiles at my touchiness. Do I protest too much? But it's true: I do not *desire* Miranda.

“I believe you,” she says. “But really, I would have no emotional objection to it. The point is more this: would she be useful to us as an attuned being? We are so few Derek. Perhaps our problems with the likes of Saul are that we are not enough.”

"Useful to us? I don’t know. What use am *I* to us?"

She gives me a patient look. "Your usefulness is in your compatibility and your very flattering attachment to me, Derek. And it's in your trust which, of course, I treasure. But still, I wonder, perhaps it would be good for you to bring someone else on, as I have done with you. Broaden your experience, so to speak."

"Sunita! Have you forgotten our purpose? As soon as I am ready, you said we would be transcending all of this. And believe me, from what I have seen of the world these short months since meeting you, I am ready whenever you are."

“I know, and we shall... soon. I promise.”

I’m puzzled by this turn of conversation, but then I see a flicker of something in her eyes. I do not need to read her mind. “You’re thinking you may not survive our next encounter with Saul. You’re trying to protect me."

She looks thoughtful for a moment, then presses my hand. "We must be prepared for all eventualities," she says. “That’s all.”

But there's more to it. "Wait! You're thinking of facing him alone. No, Sunita, I can't let you do that."

"You may have no choice, Derek."

"Why?"

"Because I may insist on it, and you would be powerless to stop me. And if things went badly for me, it would make sense for you to nurture Miranda. Her position within the establishment might be useful in dealing with Saul in the longer term."

“I’m not attuned, Sunita. Remember, without you my powers will fade. I will become ordinary again. No use my going anywhere near Miranda then because she would have no use for me.”

She smiles at that. "I'm glad you are not so blinded by your attraction that you do not see the ambition in her."

"I see the ambition because I am not blinded by attraction, and I am not blinded by attraction because *there is no attraction*. Now can we drop this, please?"

She makes no reply, guards herself, smiles secretly, then turns once more to the business of Saul.

Before closing my thoughts off, I make it be known that I will not do it, that I will not bring Miranda on. And as I'm thinking it, I feel a deep irritation at Sunita's logic, because I know she's right, that it makes sense. Which means she knows I know she's right.

"You really are impossible, Sunita?"

"Ah… but it's why you love me so. Now, we must make ready."

And making ready involves, on the face of it, no more than sitting quietly in our room, eyes lightly closed. We appear to be dozing, but we are in fact now feeling out the psychical landscape of the City of Edinburgh. We have picked up the communication lines and followed them in, ridden them with our mind's eye. CCTV. Cell masts. Rail lines, fibre optic cables, and drones.

Since the incident with the café in Coventry, I have developed an understandable interest in the armed drones that have begun to patrol our skies. I'd been unaware of them before, but it doesn't take me long to pick them out, now I know they are there. Fortunately they have a distinctive energy signature, so I am unlikely to be surprised by one again.

They fly a lazy figure of eight over the city. I count three, and estimate that not a square inch is safe from their laser guided ordnance.

I am getting better at exploring machinery. Machines were my first love of course, in the long ago, and it takes but a little practice now to fathom a way through them, as surely as if I were taking them apart with my hands. I detect bomblets, a few kilograms of explosive, modest, but enough to murder a handful of people, be they close enough together.

There is also a gun, laser targeted and, I assume, capable of great range. I imagine people sitting in offices behind computer screens, like at that control centre, images of targets popping up for their convenience, inviting sanction. Or is it not like that at all? Could it be that once the order is given, the machines make the decision, that they watch endlessly, tirelessly, waiting for their quarry, passing your ID among their brethren worldwide. Today, tomorrow, next week, next year – no difference. The machine will always get you in the end.

The craft is finely trimmed, naturally evasive. News of their presence has not yet generally come out and there will be a public outcry when it does. I make sure to have the story printed in tomorrow's newspaper, complete with artist's impression and flight-path details.

Sunita smiles as she reads this in me, approves I think.

"Let's get some air." she says.

So we walk.

It's on the beach, with a fine silver mist blowing in from a heavy sea over broad sands, she turns to me and says: "Derek, listen you're already fully attuned. I thought I felt it in you when you came for me in Saul's resting place. But I'm certain of it now.

"That you can sustain structures in your inner space, and that you had even the slightest effect on Miranda's psyche in so short a time is proof enough, if proof were needed. You have completed the journey, my love. We are now the same, you and I."

I feel a dizziness at this news. I had begun to wonder about it, that since I was already capable of so much, what else was there to attain? So, there is no going back for me, now. But then I realise this means:

"Sunita, what are we doing even contemplating facing Saul tomorrow? Let's open ourselves to one another... here... now... Forget him. Let's just do it! This is everything we've worked for, everything we've aspired to. To Hell with Saul. Let the Miranda's of the world deal with him."

She raises a hand to slow my thoughts. "Because I don't know what will happen when we open ourselves to one another. And Saul has become like a virus, contaminating our heads now, making my flesh crawl. We must be rid of him first, and then we'll need a distance of some days or weeks afterwards to wash our memories sufficiently

clean of him. There can be no trace of him left to disturb us in our purpose. But listen, if something should happen to me, tomorrow, it will make sense for you to find Miranda. See if she can't be persuaded to do with you what I could not."

"This again? Sunita... I cannot. If anything should happen to you tomorrow, I would make it my life's quest to get to Saul, or die trying. And you are not facing him alone. There has to be another way."

"But there, you see? You have proved my point. It makes more sense this way. Facing him together we both might die. But alone, if he should get to one of us, there is always a chance the other might learn from that and overcome him, somehow, another time."

"Then let me face him."

She lets me know she is far more experienced, far more likely to survive such a game as Saul proposes than me. I may be fully attuned now, but I still have a lot to learn. I read all of this in her and find it hard to argue against it on pragmatic grounds – only emotional.

"Sunita, I won't let you."

"You cannot prevent it," she says. And then: "Come, let's go back to the hotel and make love..."

She's thinking to distract me with this, and if you had made love with Sunita but once, you would understand how powerful a distraction that might be. But she forgets to close herself off, and I catch the unspoken words on the tip of her tongue.

She is thinking it might also be for the last time.

Chapter Thirty

There are many ways of killing him, but I seem to have crossed them all off the list now as implausible. You may have picked up earlier on my interest in the drones that patrol our skies, and you would be right in thinking I'm wondering if I can by some means have them pinpoint Saul and dispatch him in a hail of bullets, or with a single well aimed bomb. But I cannot think of doing so in a way that does not involve exposing ourselves to danger as well, or risking the lives of others. Our powers are considerable, but we are still bound by certain physical limitations. We need to be much more powerful than we are.

As we make our way from the beach, a low sun slants in from the west and bathes the scene in an amber light. It has a kiss of warmth about it too and the wind drops, inviting us to pause, to sit a while and to stare contemplatively out across the cobalt, foam topped waves.

How to kill Saul?

If we are to succeed in this, our powers must grow not ten fold, but a hundred. He must become like a child to us.

"Sunita, I think you're wrong."

She looks at me, a familiar eyebrow arched in query. "Oh? I tell you you are attuned, and suddenly you are pulling on the trousers again?"

I make no reply but lower my defences, open myself to her completely.

"Derek, what is this? What are you doing. Put yourself away. This... this is too much..."

"I think it's time, Sunita."
"No, I told you... we can only do it, after we have dealt with Saul."

"We should do it now."

"No. Absolutely not. We cannot do it now."

But she knows it's true, and I realise then that all along, she has been afraid of it, and understandably so. It has been the meaning the

purpose of her life. She has brought me, brought us, this far, and now she fears to take the final step.

"Really, I don't know what will happen," she says. "Anything can happen. It might kill us both. We might vanish into thin air, become whisps of spirit floating about in a universe of our own making."

"I'm prepared for that. Let go, Sunita. Open yourself to me."

"Derek... at the very least it will change us. I... I might not know you afterwards. And..."

"And?"

"Oh, Derek, is it not obvious? I... I've become very attached to you. I think you're very... sweet. I would rather go on, knowing you as I do than risk losing you to the void."

If that's the closest she'll come to admitting she's in love with me, it will have to do. "Don't be afraid, Sunita. Let those feelings guide us rather than our fear of Saul. But have you not thought that such a thing as this, it might make us stronger?"

This gives her pause. "I have not dared to think of it in those terms," she says. "The pursuit of this state has always been a pure and almost spiritual thing. It is never wise to think of what one might gain personally, beyond some form of transcendence."

"Is transcendence not exactly the thing we are needing here?"

"You don't understand, Derek."

"People keep telling me that. But what I do understand is that without some form of transcendence, or a miracle, at least one of us is going to die tomorrow. And then we truly will be lost to one another."

She thinks for a long time on this, then nods. "All right," she says. "Yes, you may be right in this." She takes my hand and closes her eyes, prepares to open herself. "No, she says, don't brace yourself. You must draw up to the cliff's edge, and leap. Leap into me."

“Leap?”

“Yes… leap. Here, take my hand. We are gathered on the edge.

Now…. One, two… three..."

It's like the lifting of a steel shutter. At first we go only a little way, testing the interaction of our thoughts. And the inside of her is beautiful. Her mind possess a richness and a wisdom far beyond her years, and she finds in me a beauty too I had not suspected, but at which I feel a rising joy. And feeling the joy she feels it too...

We begin to experience the delicious squeal of a psychic resonance, held safely in check for now, as we sense our way. But when the shutter is opened fully, the resonance is blinding, terrifying, and I want to pull away but somehow turn myself around and make that leap into the depths of her...

What I experience is a whiting out, and the sense of there being no difference between what I am and what I am looking at. I am the sand, the sea, the clouds. I am the sunlight and the amber air, and Sunita is the same. We have become the same. We sit upon the sand, hand in hand, yet simultaneously we soar, a cloud of material atoms dispersed to the eight corners of infinity. And the feel of it is love. It is both ethereally warm, and as sexual as the earth.

When I recover myself I am prone in the sand and the tide has come to lap at my toes. Sunita's clothes are neatly folded under my head for a pillow. The scent of her rises from them with an invigorating freshness. When I look, I see she has waded out a little way. It is dark now and a pale slit of moon rises, lending to her the appearance of a goddess. She is Hera, and Brigid, she is Sophia and she is Beatrice, uniquely powerful intensely still, the exquisite perfection of her body sending a shiver up my spine.

She turns, smiles, extends her hand. Her mind is open, bottomless, perfect, a silken ride all the way to the heart where the truth of her lies, and the truth of her is this:

An awesome splendour, and an insight into every material nook and cranny of the material world, without being quite of this world any more.

And with a little swirl of stars, she is gone.

The last thing I hear in my mind's ear, is her laughing.

I sit up, wondering. I still feel her presence, so I know she has not

abandoned me. Then she reappears, once more in the sea, but this time I am looking at myself when I look at her, and when I look at what I think was myself sitting there on the beach, I realise I am her, to the extent of feeling the soft, substantial weight of her bosom, and the warm, exquisite cleft of her womanhood.

We have become interchangeable concepts.

I find this shocking at first, but make certain adjustments and am beginning to enjoy this uniquely intimate awareness of her, when Sunita reclaims her apparent material form. Then I am in the sea where she was standing, the cold shock of it around my waist. Again I hear the laugher in my mind's ear as she looks on, eyes sparkling from the beach. I'm not sure where she begins nor where I end.

And then I drop, and we come round in my resting place, exactly as we were. Only we have brought the world with us too, at least in so far as we can see it – the sand the sea, the night, the moon.

And we have become more powerful than you can ever know.

Chapter Thirty-One

Miranda sits in an unfamiliar office, several floors up, an anonymous block, rising above the dour roofline of the city of Manchester. It's late now. The office is in darkness – just the lights from the city and the glow from her computer screen to softly illuminate her face. She pays the computer no attention, and instead gazes out into nothingness.

It's a while before she notices my presence as I lean in the corner, arms folded, watching her. I have been there for some time. She looks pensive, but at least she seems to have been accepted back into the corridors of authority – all be it cautiously. She is assigned to administrative duties for now, pending the outcome of psychological assessments. Her amnesia worries them. They think she's lying about it, which of course she is.

"No home to go to, Inspector?"

She gives a satisfying gasp. "Derek!"

"Just thought I'd drop in and see how you were doing."

I no longer need to have slept in a place in order to visit it, at least not like this. I can find anyone I want, anyone who is not blocking me, and merely project myself into their locale. It's an odd, but potentially useful skill. This isn't me, you understand, not the so called corporeal part anyway. That part of me is still sleeping, curled snug into Sunita back – the heat of her both a warning and a balm. What's speaking to you now, what's seeing Miranda, talking to Miranda is a phantom of myself.

I am both real and unreal at the same time.

"Have you been reading me?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Then please stop. It's... rude. And creepy."

"Granted. My apologies."

"I don't suppose there's any point asking how you got in?"

"Not really. I'm not sure I understand it myself yet, though technically speaking I'm not actually in at all, at least not to the extent I'll register as a physical presence."

She thinks on this, is sorry she asked, but glad to see me. "I'm... relieved you're okay. I heard about the café bombing. I... felt you'd managed to get out, but I couldn't be sure."

"I made it all right."

"And Sunita?"

"She's safe."

“You must both take care. You’ve no idea the level of surveillance now.”

“We’re aware of it. We can take care of it. Where did you resurface?"

"Paris, like you said. I'd thought about going to ground, but a part of me's not done hoping I can change your mind, about... you know... teaching me. I'll need all the help I can get if I'm to be posted back on active duties. A superwoman might manage it. I certainly won't. At least not in my present state of mind."

"You must be patient, Miranda. They'll let you back in."

"They'll never trust me again What happened was too strange, and still unexplained. There must always be an explanation, and for this there is not. I disappeared from a locked room with a suspect, leaving behind a dead police officer, and I materialised in Paris with no knowledge of how I got there or what happened."

"It's awkward, I know. But they didn't trust you before. They don't trust anyone. What's happened makes no difference to anything. All there is is due process. You merely need to follow it."

"You make a depressing kind of sense."

"Like someone else I know. Your world is a machine, Miranda. A machine programmed by a machine. There is no love, no hate in it any more. If it's expedient for you to have your old position again, then it shall be so. But I do not envy you your world and am glad to be out of

it."

"Then rescue me from it. Or... does Sunita not approve?"

"Sunita has no objections. Indeed she wonders if you might be useful to us."

"You've discussed this with her?"

"Of course. And I could... bring you on."

"But you won't?"

"I'm afraid of how you'll react to it. It might turn you into a goddess, like Sunita, or a devil like Saul. And you would be a formidable devil, Miranda."

She shudders, massages her shoulder unconsciously. "Saul's still out there?"

"I'm afraid so, but not for much longer. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, Sunita and I will take care of him."

"Is that what you came here to tell me?"

"Partly. Your drones worry me, Miranda. They seem cruel. They'll have to go."

"They're not my drones, Derek. They're just a manifestation of the way the world is. Like you said they're expedient. But what can I do about them?"

"Nothing. It's being taken care of, hopefully. When they start to disappear – the drones I mean – I just didn't want you wasting your time looking for another explanation. I'll send you a sign when it's begun. Probably tomorrow. Then you'll also know Saul is taken care of."

"And if there's no sign?"

"It means we've failed. That we've underestimated Saul again. It also means Saul is your problem."

"I'll never see you again, will I?"

"We can never say never, Miranda. Now, close your eyes."

I'm thinking to fade out without her seeing me, but she shakes her head, keeps her eyes defiantly open. It's not essential one is submissive, but in the process of attunement it helps, and I doubt even one as powerful as Sunita would find Miranda easy.

She watches as I melt away, melt back to Berwick, and Sunita's bed.

But Sunita is by the window now, sipping tea. She watches the sun rise, looks thoughtful, serene. She feels me stirring.

"Ready now," she asks?

"Yes." But there's a frown in it. What I really mean is I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Chapter Thirty-Two

We spend much of the day in thought, then take a late train into Edinburgh. The cafe is closed, but the lock yields easily, with a dramatic flourish of sparks, to Sunita's will. She does this to amuse me. I kill the alarm in a more discreet fashion before it has a chance to take fright, and we settle ourselves inside.

There is an air of easiness about us, something unhurried and unafraid. Sunita sits a while and amuses herself by manifesting jewelled rings upon her fingers, then dissolving them. She shapes her nails too, first pointy, then clipped, then various shades of varnish. I feel a week of growth upon my face, chastise her sweetly for putting it there, then wipe it off.

"Oh, but you looked so much more distinguished," she says.

Yes, not only can we project our insubstantial presence anywhere at will, we can manipulate our biology too, not just to the extent of repairing it. We can also shape it.

"Then shall I make your hips wider," I ask. "Your bosom smaller?"

She thinks on this for a moment, curious. "You'd prefer me with a smaller bosom, Derek?"

I take my revenge by having a lock of hair grow long and descend across her eyes.

She laughs.

We might go on in this vein like children, but we hear the door and Saul is standing framed there, bringing things to a head, so to speak. Unhurriedly, Sunita twirls the lock into a curl around her finger and arranges it more tidily.

"Something amuses you?" he says.

Ah, that's interesting. Reading him, he's unprepared for our lightness at what he was hoping to make into a more dramatic showdown. He has a penchant for the theatrical, as well as violence.

Sunita tightens her face from mirth to something more decorous.

"Good evening, Saul," she says.

I'm surprised at his directness in coming here, surprised he had not something more devious in mind than this – like perhaps launching his ice-cubes at us from remote locations in the city. But no, he's very confident. And his ego demands he sees the expression on our faces as he does us harm.

I gesture to the table, invite him to join us. His confidence is a little shaken by the fact he cannot feel us blocking, but neither can he read our thoughts. He's thinking he could take us out more or less on a whim, any time he chooses. It is only his curiosity that stays his hand. What he does not realise is our thoughts have shifted up a gear. We operate at a much higher frequency now.

We are like ghosts to him.

He sits, joins in the game.

"Nice suit," says Sunita. And indeed it is a nice suit.

"Did you make it yourself?" I ask.

Saul gives me an impatient scowl. "Are you trying to be funny?"

Sunita is at pains to reassure him. "I'm sure Derek meant it as a compliment, Saul. You are both of you, in your different ways, highly proficient craftsmen"

He finds our jauntiness annoying now, wonders if we are drunk, or high. "Well... yes I did make it myself, actually."

"You flatter us," she says. "Clearly the occasion means something to you. But I'm forgetting my manners. Would you like coffee before we begin?" She manifests cups, complete with instant grains, then pours water from a jug. "It's always nice to be civilised, don't you think?"

I take a sip. Saul obeys a long embedded reflex and does the same, pulls a face and sets the cup down with a clatter. "It's cold," he says. "You need to try a bit harder than that, love."

"Ah, one moment," she says, and at once, the coffee is steaming.

"You used your energy to the heat water?" he asks. "You'll regret that. You'll need all the energy you can muster in a moment."

"We don't need to fear wasting energy, Saul. We're not like you. Anyway, no. I didn't use my own energy. I used yours."

He doesn't understand, ignores her, thinks idly of undressing her. Yes, we both felt that. The steel shutter of his mind is softening, becoming like smoke, which thins and leaves him wide open. Even I could enter idly and manifest whatever I like inside of him now. I wonder... what might I use? An ice cube? A spike? A stuffed Mr Happy doll? A frog? No... the latter is living matter – I still cannot do that. I would *never* do that.

Then what shall we do? Sunita answers for me, and playfully.

He gives a jolt as his suit vanishes. He's left wearing only his socks, looks pale and vulnerable, and ever so slightly ridiculous. Sunita slaps the table and hoots with laughter. This was not part of the plan, but whatever amuses her is fine by me. "Oh Derek, you males have no idea how silly you look without your clothes on."

I rally in Saul's defence. "To be fair we do look better without the socks, Sunita."

"You think so?"

The socks also vanish. She shakes her head. "Not much of an improvement," she says. "Perhaps, my dear Saul, you need to enquire about gym membership? I certainly wouldn't swap my body for yours."

Saul covers his embarrassment. "All right, very funny," he says.

At this point either he tries to manifest a change of clothes, or he tries to divest Sunita and I of our own in a tit for tat revenge. I feel the rush in him, familiar from my own mental patterns during the manipulation of matter. But nothing happens, and at last I see the look on Saul's face I have so longed to see since first realising what he was capable of: Helplessness.

"You see," says Sunita. "I really did use your energy to heat the coffee, and then some. Banal, I know, after the dramatic showdown you were planning. We were thinking we'd have to kill you. And I would have, but

for Derek here. It's Derek you must thank for your life. But we agreed to take your power instead. It's a little less than you deserve in my opinion, but it suffices."

"I'm sorry Saul, but that's the way it is. It's a pity you chose the path you did, or we might have been friends."

"Sorry?" He stands, overcome with a terrible rage, overturns the table, sends coffee and cups raining down. "I'll show you sorry!" He tries to manifest a spike, then an ice cube. Both times I am his target. (There's gratitude for you) Nothing happens. There is no need even to defend myself. He's impotent; truly harmless now.

I'm almost sad for him. "It's finished Saul."

Sunita and I make to leave.

Saul stands in stunned amazement, contemplates his life ahead, his vulnerability, the chances he might evade authority as an ordinary mortal, then thinks of the practical: "For pity's sake," he implores." At least leave me some clothes."

I'm for granting him this one last bit of dignity, but then compassion was always my weakness. I look to Sunita, but she's remembering the humiliations he visited upon her, and she gives a firm little shake of the head.

"By the way," she says. "I've called the cops. So you need to get busy."

He tries to step inside of himself, but remains exactly where he is, trapped in a material reality and entirely at its mercy. Yes, we could have killed him, easily, and maybe you think we should, but killing is always a mistake, a mistake made only too often by the powerful as they hold sway over the weak, not realising the more powerful one becomes, the less one has need of it.

Out in the street, I feel for the drones, explode them one by one so the car alarms and house alarms and shop alarms go off all over the city. The display is breathtaking, the shock wave really quite stunning.

"Very pretty," she says. "Why?"

"Because a man with no pants on deserves a sporting chance."

"Not that he would have given us one," she says. "Plus you promised Miranda a sign, did you not?"

"I did."

"I still think we should have killed him. I'm not sure there isn't a way he can still claw back his powers."

"That's as may be. But anyway, the greater the power, Sunita, the greater the need for compassion, or we risk turning into... well...him."

"Yes, Master."

"So, what now?"

She takes my arm and we saunter away, eventually joining the crowds spilling from the nightclubs. "I have in mind a new identity," she says. "The ability to alter our form adds all manner of new possibilities to the adventure, don't you think?"

"Yes. But I think we should take our time learning how to use it."

"Point taken. Have you not noticed how much happier I am to allow you the wearing of the trousers now and then?"

"Yes, it's much appreciated, not to feel so... submissive all the time."

A man falls down drunk at our feet. Sunita kneels and lays a hand upon his forehead, then casually rises and we carry on. The man get up sober and bewildered. "You were right," she says "While we cannot mend the world, it's probably wise to help out where the opportunity arises."

"I'm glad you think so. But listen, this new identity you were talking about. Is there any particular way you'd want me to look?"

"How do you mean?"

"Would you prefer me more muscular, perhaps?"

She pulls a face to indicate her distaste for muscular men. "I only said that to Saul to insult him. I didn't mean it."

"Okay, no muscles. You'd prefer me as a woman perhaps?"

She laughs at this. "I'm beginning to suspect you might enjoy that more than me, Derek. No, if you can manage a trim little beard and ginger hair, that might be fun for a while. Otherwise, really, I like you as you are."

I make the transformation and she laughs once more. "How cute," she says.

Police sirens wail and the night is illumined by a fluorescent blue stabbing. "Do you think he'll get away?" I ask.

"Frankly, I couldn't care less," she replies. "He can do no more harm than anyone else now, which means he's no longer our responsibility."

"You know, for a while there he had me worried."

"Me too. It was clever of you to surmise the coming together of two attuned people would release such potential."

"Not clever at all. More desperate, really. It just seemed our only option."

"Indeed."

"By the way, here..." I offer her a small manifestation.

"What's this?"

"The key to my place."

"Ah!" She takes it, pockets it carefully. "About time too. Shall we go see if your beach is still there?"

"All right."

"Or would you prefer to go find Miranda, impress her with your new found powers? I don't mind waiting while you do, but if ours is to be an open relationship, Derek, you must at least afford me the same freedoms."

"Sunita, it pleases me to discover you are not perfect."

"Oh?"

"Sometimes you can be really annoying."

"I'm very glad to hear it, my love."

We find a shadow of the street, and shimmer out of view. It's been a long journey, and I cannot admit to feeling any more certain about things now than I did in the old days, before ever meeting Sunita. Life now is more complex, certainly, more replete with possibilities, and all of them bewildering. I have no idea where any of this will end, but as I keep telling myself, this is simply the price of being with Sunita.

And gladly paid.

Ends